

## No Hurry to Leave

A/N I intended to see if this idea would make a story AFTER I finished 'Souls Abound'. What changed my mind was a review I received some weeks back telling me I was approaching a total of a million words posted on FFN. On checking, very much to my surprise, I found that to be true. I decided to mark the event of my first million with a new story, this first chapter takes me over that million word total.

As usual, canon when story begins, AU by end of first chapter. As always – Thanks for reading.

### Chapter 1

The relief Remus Lupin felt at Dumbledore's arrival in the department of mysteries was immeasurable. He'd fought in enough battles to know they were only moments away from total defeat, that was before Albus showed up and turned the tide. When your opposition were death eaters, defeat meant death with only whether it would be quick or slow still to be decided. His relief proved premature though as Bellatrix Lestrange let out a triumphant scream. Remus spun around just in time to see his best friend in the world fall through the veil of death.

Remus was so shocked that Harry had raced past him before the boy's intentions even registered with the werewolf. Screaming "Sirius!" Harry Potter followed his godfather into the veil before anyone could stop him.

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Harry had raced up the podium with only one thing on his mind, help his godfather. He dived into the archway and felt a sensation not unlike that of portkey travel before he found himself in another place. Harry didn't care where he was, he could see his godfather in front of him. With a cry of 'Sirius', he launched himself into his godfather's arms.

It was a thoroughly surprised Sirius who spoke to his godson. "Hey kiddo, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I couldn't lose you too Sirius, you're all I have left!"

"Harry?"

The woman saying his name forced Harry to notice the two people Sirius had been talking with before he so rudely interrupted. His godfather's arms currently wrapped around him were now the only things keeping Harry upright as his legs turned to jelly. The young couple present were very familiar to Harry, he'd spent many an hour studying their images since Hagrid gave him that photo album at the end of his first year. "Mum? Dad? How is this possible? What is this place?"

His questions went unanswered for the moment as both his parents crashed into their son and his godfather. Four people were now involved in a needy hug that featured lots of tears.

The only thing Harry could equate his current environment with was the room of requirements at Hogwarts. He was just thinking that he could really be doing with a seat when a large semi-circular sofa appeared. Harry sat with his mum on one side of him while his dad and Sirius claimed the other. It was now time to talk although Harry was still holding on tightly to both his parents. He didn't want to take any chances of them disappearing and had no plans to release his holds anytime soon.

James Potter was the first to find his voice. Unfortunately his brain hadn't caught up with events yet, all that came out was a parrot of Sirius from earlier. "Harry, what the hell are you doing here?"

The stupidity of his question being asked again started Sirius sniggering, this set Harry laughing and his parents soon followed their son's example. For a boy whose only previous experience of hearing his mother's voice involved dementors and featured Voldemort, hearing her laughter was wonderful.

Lily couldn't take her eyes off her son, even when speaking to her husband. "Perhaps it would be better if you told our boy where here is James, we already know how he got here. Following his godfather through the veil, a godfather who was too busy taunting his cousin instead of fighting the crazy bitch."

Harry was certain he could never get tired of listening to his mother's voice. What did surprise him though was how much she sounded

like Hermione, especially when his best friend was scolding him and Ron. His mother's tone matched Hermione's exactly, she also appeared easily a match for his dad and Sirius.

James thought it prudent to comply with his wife so started providing Harry with some answers. "This place really doesn't have a name son, you have to die to arrive here though."

Harry just stared at his father, "So I'm dead then?"

Lily now had both arms wrapped around her son before she spoke. "For everyone else, that would be true. You though, are different Harry. Circumstances have contrived to give you a second chance."

Harry was dumbfounded, "Circumstances?"

His mother smiled at him, she understood his deep-rooted need to be normal. "The night Voldemort gave you that scar, he didn't die because he'd deliberately created anchors to the physical world. Your scar was one of those anchors, it's lying over there."

Harry had thought the creature Wormtail had dunked into that giant cauldron was ugly, this thing just took that trophy. Harry felt unclean just looking at it. "That thing was in my head? Is that why I could feel Voldemort?"

His dad confirmed Harry's suspicions. "There was a bit of Voldemort's soul attached to your own. It couldn't influence you but has been feeding off your magic. There was another piece in that diary you stabbed, the one that nearly killed your friend Ginny."

Harry couldn't help but ask. "You guys know about that? How?"

His mother was holding onto Harry every bit as tightly as he was onto her. "We've watched over you every minute since we've been gone. That night in the cemetery wasn't us, just an echo that came from Voldemort's wand. I don't think I've ever been prouder of you than I was that night. We can watch the ones we love from here, and everything that affects them. We'll be beside you always son but you can go back, we want to watch you living your life."

Harry had shed some tears already tonight but now began really crying. This felt like rejection from his parents and godfather, something Harry just couldn't deal with. "What life mum? You say you've watched me? Then you and dad must know what it's like for me back there. I have no life!" He tried to control his crying and explain. "When I was about six I once saw an old black and white movie that had one of the saddest things I'd ever seen. This poor little monkey was in chains, forced to wear a ridiculous costume and dance every time the organ grinder turned the handle. The poor animal's only function in life was to dance on demand for the public's amusement. It was sad and it was cruel but everyone just laughed while clapping along in time to the music."

Harry tried to wipe his tears and looked to his parents before continuing. "That has always stuck with me and you know why? It's because I feel exactly like that monkey! Before Hogwarts I was locked in my cupboard, let out to do what the Dursleys wanted before being flung back in there." Lily was now crying along with her son while his dad and Sirius just looked murderous. James had never hated anyone enough to use the cruciatus curse on them, he would have no problem casting it on his obese brother-in-law for the way he treated his son.

The support Harry was now feeling spurred him on. This was a much-needed opportunity for Harry to talk freely about his life with people who loved him unconditionally, he grasped it with both hands. "When I went to Hogwarts, it may have been a different tune but the handle was still being turned. The chains were still there and I was expected to perform for the demanding public. Saving magical stones, slaying basilisks, fighting dementors and finding myself in deadly competitions I knew nothing about. This year the ministry decided to get in on the act and I found myself undergoing trials and torture because I refused to dance to their tune. Well they'll all have to find themselves a new performer because this monkey's done dancing!"

Harry was now sobbing again as his mother held him in her arms while his father rubbed his back, this felt so wonderful that Harry began to calm down. He didn't change his mind though, if anything he was now more determined than ever to stay. Looking at his mum, dad and godfather as they comforted him soon had Harry speaking

again. "This here is all I've ever wanted, all I've ever needed. How can you ask me to give this up?"

James attempted to comfort his son. "Harry, no one is asking you to give this up. We'll always be with you and waiting here for you when it's time to return. If it takes a hundred years we'll still be here, I only hope you keep us waiting longer."

Lily felt as if she were adding to her son's burden but he'd a right to know. Too many people had hurt her boy by not telling him things he needed to know. "Harry, that prophecy was about you and Voldemort. Basically, you are the only one that can kill him. That's why Death is prepared to take that part of Voldemort in payment for letting you return, he's hoping you can send the rest of him here. Voldemort has cheated death and Death doesn't like that."

This was a lot of information for Harry to absorb, he spotted a flaw in his mother's reasoning though. "Won't I be cheating death if I go back? Doesn't that make me as bad as Voldemort?"

James ruffled his son's hair. He fondly remembered his father doing that with him but had died before he could repeat the gesture with his own son. "No Harry, Voldemort doesn't just want to rule the world, he wants to be immortal and rule it forever. Death is prepared to bend the rules more than a little to stop that happening, this is the second piece of Voldemort's soul you've given him. Yes, you may still be alive but you'll die one day. Hopefully, peacefully in bed from old age with all your great-grandchildren around you."

Harry glanced toward his godfather, waiting to hear his opinion. Sirius didn't keep him waiting. "Harry, two years ago I was prepared to face death. I was prepared as anyone ever is until you and the brilliant Miss Granger arrived on a Hippogriff and rescued me. Now you may think that was all for naught as I'm now dead anyway but I would have to disagree. In those two years I got a chance to know my godson and his friends, that time was precious and priceless to me. Even knowing what I know now, I would still climb onto Buckbeak and take those two years."

Sirius understood Harry's reluctance. Even in the last two years, he'd watched helplessly as Dumbledore and now Fudge fought for control of his godson. "Harry, I can understand where you're coming

from but it doesn't have to be that way. You'll now have the power to break those chains and dance to your own tune."

Harry still didn't want to leave though. "Is there any way of knowing what will happen if I don't go back?"

James appeared to stare off into space for a moment before answering his son. To Harry it seemed as if his dad was receiving information from someone. "Harry, Voldemort was on his way to the ministry. He was only told part of the prophecy and is desperate to get his hands on the full thing. He'll meet Bellatrix in the atrium and won't care anymore. The instant she tells him you're dead, the prophecy no longer matters to him. He'll leave without anyone else seeing him. With you dead and no sign of Voldemort, the Malfoy money will get the death eaters out of trouble again. You and Sirius will be blamed for everything and Dumbledore will have to flee once more as our world spirals into darkness."

Neither Harry nor Sirius had any trouble believing that could happen. It was also obvious that his dad didn't want to say the next bit but felt he had to. "After discovering Neville had been subjected to the cruciatus by Bellatrix, his gran decided that was enough and the Longbottoms leave Britain. The Weasleys won't be so lucky, the Burrow will be burned to the ground. So will Luna's home but she and her father will be travelling abroad at the time, they will choose not to return."

Harry noticed his father didn't mention casualties at the Burrow, he didn't intend to ask. There was still one name missing, a name Harry was desperate to hear all about. Watching Hermione get hit with that curse tonight almost stopped his heart, Harry thought it only started back up after Neville said he felt a pulse.

James knew what Harry was waiting for and hated to disappoint. "I'm sorry son. When Hermione's parents saw her injuries and heard you had been killed, they withdrew their daughter from Hogwarts. With her being muggleborn, Malfoy used his money and ministerial influence to see all the Grangers had their memories of the magical world wiped. Hermione had her wand snapped and magic bound, we have no way of knowing what happened after that."

Hermione, his best friend, wouldn't shed a tear at his passing because she wouldn't remember him. That wasn't what changed his

mind though, Harry couldn't see any way that Draco wouldn't want revenge on the 'mudblood' that had bested him at every turn. With his father's connections in the ministry, it would be easy for him to get hold of her address. Hermione wouldn't only be defenceless, she wouldn't even know trouble was coming. Draco and his cronies could walk right up her garden path and knock on the Grangers' door!

"What do I have to do to go back and change things?"

It was his mother who answered. "Chase Bellatrix back into the atrium and delay Voldemort long enough for people to see him. Only then will you have a fighting chance. There's so much more we need to tell you..."

Harry interrupted, "Don't I need to leave right away. Voldemort could have left by the time I get back."

Harry heard the sound of his mother's laughter again. "Harry, time doesn't matter here. You'll go back to the instant you left, it will be as if you passed right through the veil."

Something about his mother's statement triggered an idea in Harry's brain, it took a while to come out though. In his defence, Harry could honestly claim he'd just had one hell of a day. When it did click, he had a very important question to ask his mother. "Mum, if time doesn't matter here, does that mean I can stay with you guys for a while? I would still go back to the exact moment I left, wouldn't I?"

Harry watched as three faces lit up at that idea. "Told you he was smart Lily, we never even thought of that. There's so much I want to tell you son, there's so much I want to teach you. I'm finally going to get that chance!"

The hugs and happy tears started again as everyone showed their appreciation of Harry's solution. Harry himself was ecstatic, his life-long dream had just come true. Facing Voldemort seemed a small price to pay for spending time with his parents and godfather, and Harry was in no hurry to leave.

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Remus was screaming 'NO!' when Harry appeared to flicker for a split second as he passed right through the veil of death, emerging unscathed from the other side. He didn't get time to contemplate this as Harry raced up the steps, chasing a retreating Bellatrix. Remus did get a glimpse of Harry's expression, the determination shown there was a sight to behold.

Bellatrix had just gotten the better of Shacklebolt when Dumbledore fired a curse at her, she deflected it away before deciding it was time to run. Bellatrix was speeding through the room that contained Potter's friends and was contemplating firing off a few curses. A powerful hex whizzing past her ear returned her concentration to the task at hand, getting the hell out of the ministry. She fired a curse over her shoulder, which luckily hit a tank full of brains. Bella didn't stop to see if her delaying tactic was effective but raced for the lifts. Lucius had their portkey so she needed to make it to the public exit in the ministry atrium since they blocked the floors.

Harry was desperate to stop and help his friends, his dad had been very specific though and they'd gone over this time after time. The best way to help his friends was to publicly expose that Voldemort was not only alive, but very much a threat. For that, Bellatrix needed to be allowed to reach the atrium. Harry had no intention of letting her leave the atrium though. After ensuring she didn't stop anywhere near his friends, Harry raced after her and followed through the revolving room, easy to get out of when you knew how. He saw the lift start to move up and called for one of his own.

He shot out the lift doors before they were fully open and spotted the bitch, she was nearly at the telephone lift. Harry fired a curse at her before diving behind the fountain of magical brethren.

Bella spun and batted it away, before firing a curse that blew the golden wizard's head clean off. She stopped running and started taunting. "Come out, come out, little Harry!" Bella started to walk slowly back toward the fountain. "What did you come after me for then? I thought you were here to avenge my dear departed cousin?"

"I AM!" Shouted Harry, his words echoing around the empty atrium.

"Ah, did you love him? Little baby Potter."



Harry was calmer than he thought possible with that question, having long ago come to terms with the fact that Sirius was dead. He'd also been intensively coached by his godfather on how to deal with Bellatrix. Ironical, since Sirius didn't and she'd killed him. "Yes I did, and he loved me! He loved me so much, Sirius made me his heir. I'm the new head of the Black family!"

It was Bellatrix who lost it, she screamed 'NO!' before firing another destructive curse at the fountain.

Harry though, was just getting started. "Yes, he didn't want it passing to anyone who would bow to a half blood bastard called Tom Riddle. I believe you know him better as Voldemort!"

Bella was now raining destructive curses down on the fountain while screaming at the top of her voice. All attempts at baby talk were long forgotten. "You dare let his name pass your unworthy lips, I'll kill you for that."

Harry laughed loudly at her. "Just wait until your wonderful master discovers that you failed him, the prophecy is gone. His best death eaters beaten by a bunch of kids! Now there's something to put on those death eater recruitment posters. Can death eaters actually read?"

Bella was now foaming at the mouth like a mad dog. "You're a liar Potter, you've got the prophecy. Give it to me and I'll kill you quickly. Accio prophecy!"

Harry taunted her with his laughter again. "Nothing is happening Lestranger, that's because it's gone. Do you think your beloved master will be merciful?"

"No, it isn't true, you're lying! Master I tried, I tried. Please don't hurt me..."

"Don't waste your breath, he can't hear you."

"Can't I Potter?" Asked a cold voice.

Harry now saw lord Voldemort standing in the middle of the atrium. He was staring intently at him. "So Potter, you destroyed my prophecy?" Harry didn't think he was supposed to answer that so

didn't bother with a reply. The longer Voldemort talked, the more chance there was of the ministry finally getting its arse in gear. How the hell could they get a warning owl to him within seconds of Dobby dropping a cake on that woman's head, yet running battles inside the ministry were so far being ignored.

Voldemort continued, basically talking to himself. "Months of preparation, months of effort and my death eaters have let Harry Potter thwart me again."

Bella flung herself at Voldemort's feet. "Master I am sorry, I knew not. I was fighting the animagus Black."

Harry was thinking it was easier to face this arsehole without that piece of soul in his head, he certainly didn't miss those blinding headaches Voldemort's physical presence used to cause. He saw the broken golden wand lying amongst the wreckage and could think of a far better use for it than spouting out water all day.

Bella was prostrate on the floor, desperately trying to avoid being punished by her master. She was sobbing as she spoke. "Master, you should know..."

Voldemort never got to hear what he should know as the golden wand shot across the atrium at great speed and imbedded itself into Bella's head. The dark lord was reduced to watching helplessly as his most trusted lieutenant was slain at his feet.

Harry's voice echoed around the atrium to break the resulting silence. "You may give out silver hands Tom but I thought giving a golden wand was a touch of class, don't you think so? Mrs Lestrangle appears quite taken with it, it's the first time the crazy bitch has been quiet all night."

Voldemort hissed and unleashed a killing curse at his young nemesis.

Harry was already moving before the damaged golden statue of the house elf animated and deflected the curse away. The golden elf then stood guard in front of a bemused Harry Potter.

"What!" screamed Voldemort before turning around and spotting who was responsible for this outrage. "Dumbledore!"

"It was foolish of you to come here tonight Tom, the aurors are on their way!"

Harry hated to admit it but, as much as Dumbledore pissed him off with his 'I know better than everyone else' attitude, the old bastard had his own inimitable style! He walked calmly toward Tom as if he was taking a stroll around the Black Lake on a summer evening. Curses were raining down on Dumbledore as Voldemort unleashed a maelstrom of magic designed to end his long life, the old wizard never even blinked. At one point Fawkes appeared and swallowed a killing curse to save his bonded wizard.

Harry thought it was magnificent, ridiculous, bordering on insanity as both wizards appeared determined to prove who the most powerful mage in the country was, while discussing death as if it was the weather. They would see the ministry building collapse on their heads before giving an inch. As a spectacle, it was breathtaking. As a fight, Harry thought it was a dead loss. Dumbledore had no intention of killing Tom and continually countered every move snakeface made, it was always going to end in a draw with the coward eventually running away.

It went quiet and Harry thought it was over before he was suddenly in immense pain. It felt as if Nagini had gotten under his skin and was determined to squeeze his intestines out through his eyeballs. When his mouth started moving, it wasn't Harry who was doing the speaking. "Kill me now, Dumbledore..."

Harry recognised what was happening and began fighting back. "Yes professor, kill me now. My parents and godfather are waiting for me on the other side, I'm not afraid of death sir. Not like Tom!"

The love that was flowing through Harry was like sulphuric acid to Voldemort, he was ejected screaming in agony. Harry was panting from the effort but still standing, Voldemort slowly rose to his feet. "You say you don't fear death Potter, very well. By the time I've killed all your friends, you'll welcome it!"

Quick as a flash, a blue bolt of light shot out Harry's hand and hit the dark lord in the centre of his forehead. Voldemort didn't get knocked on his back, the curse hit with such force he flipped right over and hit the floor with his chest. The atrium was now rapidly filling with

people, most of who had just witnessed what happened. Harry didn't give a toss, he only had eyes for Voldemort. The feared dark lord was now sporting a rather large lightning bolt shaped scar in the very centre of his forehead. It was bleeding profusely and looked as if it hurt like a bitch.

Harry's voice though cut right through any pain, it had all the power and focus of an industrial laser. "Go after my friends Tom and it won't be death you'll need to fear. I will destroy you and everyone who bears your mark. Tell Peter I'll be coming for him, soon!"

Only after Voldemort portkeyed away did Harry notice the atrium was now rather full and that all eyes were on him. Shit, normal service has been resumed. The minister was even there, wearing pyjamas under his pin-stripe cloak. Hadn't the man ever heard of transfiguration? Honestly!

At least the minister had the decency to head Dumbledore off before the old man could get his hands on his pet project Potter. After all, why would Fudge deal with the monkey? You go to the organ grinder for answers. That this particular organ grinder was still a wanted criminal had probably slipped the minister's mind at the moment. No wonder the country was in the state it was.

This development actually suited Harry, he had places to be and things that needed doing. He didn't have time to shoot the breeze with these two right now.

Albus had to confirm for about the fortieth time that, yes, that actually was Lord Voldemort who'd been inside the ministry. These people had seen him with their own eyes yet still needed it confirmed. When Fudge heard there were more death eaters below in the department of mysteries, death eaters that Harry Potter and his friends had fought, he refused outright to believe it.

He demanded to question the boy himself, it was only then they realised that Harry Potter was no longer there.

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Neville was the first to see him. "Arry!"

Harry grabbed his friend in a one-armed hug before placing his other hand gently over Neville's broken nose. He spoke quietly to Neville as a white glow appeared underneath Harry's hand. "Neville, you were fantastic tonight! I would never have made it without you, none of us would. I know you're terrified to tell your gran about your dad's wand but I think I can help." Harry slipped a golden wand into Neville's hand before explaining. "I copied your move from earlier when you jabbed Hermione's wand into McNair's eye. I stuck this wand into that bitch's head, Bellatrix Lestrange cast her last cruciatus on a Longbottom tonight!"

Neville was now staring at the golden rod with awe before Harry offered a word of caution. "Hide it for now Nev, I kinda stole it and they might want it back as evidence." Neville clamped an arm around Harry's shoulders while the other hid the precious rod of metal inside his robes. He thought his gran would probably frame it. Harry was right though, she wouldn't say a word about his dad's wand being broken now.

Harry left a happy Neville and quickly made his way over to Luna and Ginny. Both witches were sitting together on the floor with their backs against the wall. Harry knelt down and put his hands on the redhead's injured ankle. "Girls, you fought like tigers tonight, I was so proud of you. We worked as a team and looked out for each other, that made the difference." Ginny was looking at Harry and blushing at the praise, missing his glowing hands and the pain leaving her broken ankle.

He then moved on to Ron, his mate was still sitting in a daze. Harry placed one hand on his forehead and the other on his scared arm. His hands were glowing again. "Hang in there Ron, this will do the trick but leave you with the mother of all headaches. Pomfrey will fix you up with a potion when you get back to the castle." His healing could mend Ron but it would take a potion to neutralise the toxins currently in his system. Either that or twenty-four hours in a dark, quiet room while the body got rid of them itself.

Ron groaned in pain but was clearly back with them again. "Bloody hell Harry, you weren't joking about the headache part. Is everyone ok?"

"Just Hermione left to see, heading there now. Sorry mate, I need to move before everyone else arrives. Take care of them for me."

Harry could now go to the one person he'd been desperate to visit since coming back through the veil. Hermione was unconscious, lying on her back on top of a desk. Her complexion was ghostly pale and her breathing was far too shallow for Harry's liking. Harry conjured privacy screens around them before carrying out his first action, he had to tear her clothes away to get at the wound. His hand was luminous as he slowly moved it up and down the wound, Harry's other was tenderly moving bushy brown hair off Hermione's face. By the time his luminous hand had completed a full circuit, the wound was almost closed. Hermione's colour and breathing were also rapidly improving, so much so that her eyelids began to flicker.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes to find herself looking directly into a very familiar pair of sparkling green ones.

"Hermione Jane Granger, don't you dare ever frighten me like that again!" Harry's voice was barely above a whisper but he still managed to express a full symphony of emotions. "I thought I'd lost you Hermione, I don't know what I'd do without you!"

Hermione answered him with a smile before asking a question she really needed answered. "Harry, why is your hand moving up and down my chest?"

"Well, I wanted to make sure I didn't leave any scarring. Oh, next time we go shopping, it's on me. I didn't have time to loosen anything."

Hermione didn't know what to make of that answer but Harry didn't give her time to think about it. "We'll be getting disturbed pretty soon and there's something I really need to say to you. Whatever you hear me say tonight, don't worry your pretty little head over it. I will always need Hermione Jane Granger in my life. Please don't worry about me, I'll find you wherever you are."

"Harry, you're not making any sense, and your hand is still on my chest!"

Hermione raised her head to look down her body and couldn't believe what she saw. Harry's hand was glowing as it glided over her unblemished skin, she didn't have a mark on her! He moved his

hand away and her torn clothes became a Gryffindor Quidditch jersey.

Harry bent down and kissed her forehead before whispering in her ear. "It says Potter on the back but you can keep it. I still owe you a shopping trip though."

The screens disappeared and, with a wink that only she could see, Hermione thought Harry just became a different person.

"Don't you know that people put up privacy screens for a purpose? Usually because they want a bit of privacy." Harry gently helped Hermione to sit, his back still to the people who'd entered the room and removed the screens.

Fudge was not impressed. "Potter, what's the meaning of running away upstairs? I wanted to question you!"

Harry's answer was fairly dripping with sarcasm. "Why minister, don't you read your own propaganda in the Prophet? I'm nothing but an attention seeking arsehole!"

Harry was now sitting on the desk with his arm draped around Hermione, she couldn't help but join in. She'd literally been trembling with fear earlier tonight but had stood and fought beside Harry. She'd also known tonight was a trap but followed Harry anyway. This may be a different battle but she had no intention of abandoning him now. Hermione knew she was badly injured tonight yet Harry's magic hands had healed her. They felt absolutely bloody wonderful too! No time to think about Harry's gentle caress now but she already planned on detailed exploration of this new phenomenon later. Hermione didn't know what was going on here but instantly knew whose side she was on.

"Harry, don't you remember? It was delusional, attention seeking arsehole. Speaking of arseholes, please tell me you caught Lucius Malfoy? I would hate to see him get away with it again." Only the slightest of squeezes from Harry's arm was needed for Hermione to know he appreciated what she was doing, they never did need long speeches between them.

Harry was almost chuckling with glee at Hermione's forwardness, this could be fun. He had no trouble imagining his mum, dad and

Sirius choking with laughter, munching popcorn as they watched and cheered them on. "Oh we got him Hermione, in full death eater costume and with a wand that's fired off nothing but unforgivable curses all night. I wonder how he'll buy, I mean talk his way out of this one?"

At that, shy, awkward, no confidence Neville decided to get in on the act. He approached his two friends. "Hermione, here's your wand back. I had to borrow it after mine got broken. You may want to give it a good clean and polish though. I stuck it through McNair's death eater mask so it may still have a bit of his eyeball on the tip. Doesn't he work for the ministry, minister?"

Luna and Ginny helped Ron over as the six once more stood together. Luna's musical voice also lent support to Harry. "Harry, I'm sure daddy will love another interview for the paper. He'll probably want to talk to all of us after what happened here."

Fudge had listened to enough. Getting dragged out of bed and then finding Voldemort inside the ministry had really ruined his mood, he wasn't about to take shit from kids. "Just who do you think you are? You six children broke into the ministry, caused massive amounts of damage and now stand there slandering the names of upstanding wizards! You'll all be facing charges for this farce tonight."

Harry's tone was nothing short of derogatory. "Tut, tut, tut, minister. Been there, done that, can't be bothered doing it again. Didn't Albus here tell you we're now playing by new rules? What am I saying, of course he didn't tell you. He didn't bloody tell me and it cost my godfather his life!"

There were loud gasps from Ginny and Hermione at this revelation, Harry also felt Hermione's arm snake around his back in a welcome offer of comfort. He knew Ron was pretty much out of it at the moment, Luna and Neville could be brought up to speed later. Fudge appeared ready to explode while Dumbledore was preparing to take over and direct the conversation away from things he didn't want anyone to know. Harry pushed on regardless. "Voldemort is back, you all saw him. What you didn't see was the battle that took place down here. He sent his best death eaters into the ministry to steal a prophecy, a prophecy that says I will be the one to defeat him."



This drew gasps of astonishment from everyone, even Dumbledore was shocked by this revelation. Harry figured it was more to do with him changing the prophecy that rocked the old wizard, rather than spouting it out into the open. You could guarantee within forty-eight hours, the entire magical population of Britain would have heard about the prophecy. The ministry leaked information all the time, there was no way this would be contained.

A lot of the ministry crowd were obviously not happy at hearing this revelation, it was an auror who voiced their grievance though. "If you can do that Potter, why didn't you finish him off tonight?"

The contempt running through Harry came over clearly in his voice and body language. "Why should I? So Fudge here can set me up with some bogus charge and ship me off to Azkaban? Problem solved! Dark lord gone and Potter rotting his arse off in prison. Feed the Prophet any old shit and the magical population will eat it all up. This is the same man who sent Umbridge to Hogwarts and allowed her to torture children. Why the hell should I lift a finger to help him or you?"

The mood had certainly turned hostile and Harry noticed the three girls had their wands in their hands. Ron quietly passed his to Neville, he couldn't concentrate enough at the moment to cast a spell. Harry wasn't finished though, not by a long shot.

"How many of you saw Voldemort here tonight? How many of you actually fired a curse at him? I put him on the ground while you all stood there like frightened children. We six took on Voldemort's best and are still standing, you'll find eleven bound death eaters in the other room. Bellatrix ran away but didn't get far, she's lying dead in the atrium. My advice would be to have the lot of them kissed. They came here tonight intent on murdering schoolchildren, the fact they got their arses kicked doesn't take away that they're a bunch of murdering bastards. Voldemort has already proven Azkaban is no obstacle to him. How many aurors and guards will die trying to stop him, next time he wants his followers back?"

Fudge was a political animal, he understood at once Harry held a good hand here. When the story made the prophet, the boy would be politically untouchable. The public would demand the reinstatement of crucifixion and use it on the minister if he moved against Harry Potter. While Voldemort lived, Harry Potter had just

become the-boy-who-gets-whatever-the-hell-he-wants. It was time to find out what that was. "What do you want Potter?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you minister but you have nothing I want. I've had enough of Hogwarts and the magical world, I intend to leave both. I've sat my O.W.L.s and am head of two families now. Legally I'm entitled to walk away and that's what I plan to do."

Dumbledore had been quiet up to now but couldn't remain so any longer. "I'm sorry Harry, I can't allow you to do that."

Harry expected nothing less, he stood up to face Dumbledore. "Could you please tell me why this is any of your business? Last time I looked you were no longer headmaster of Hogwarts. You're a criminal on the run, just like Sirius. Oh sorry, since you keeping crucial information to yourself got him killed, that's no longer a true comparison." It was clear for everyone to see Harry's anger was building. "I asked you straight out why Voldemort was after me, you fobbed me off with some shit excuse and I've just watched another person die tonight. Quirrell, Cedric and now Sirius! No more old man, I've had enough!"

"Harry my boy, this is just the grief talking. Perfectly understandable..."

Harry interrupted. "That's what I thought I was being here, perfectly understandable! Apparently you're just not listening. I'm walking out of here tonight and I would advise you not to try and stop me."

Albus sighed in resignation. "I'm sorry Harry, you'll see this is for the best when you cool off. Activate!" Having silently cast the portkey spell on Harry's robes, he watched along with everyone else as Harry Potter left the building. The lad was now safe in the headmaster's office at Hogwarts, Albus would give him some time to kick his heels before talking some sense into him. "Now Cornelius, Harry is safe at Hogwarts and I really must insist..."

SLAP!

Hermione Granger's hand connected with Dumbledore's cheek, knocking his half moon glasses flying and leaving behind quite the handprint. "How dare you do that to Harry. What right have you got to just kidnap someone?" Hermione didn't wait for an answer, she

was off on a rant about injustice. "There are laws that protect, governments to enforce them, that's how a society works. Yours is dying because certain people think they are above all that."

Hermione's voice now dropped to barely that of a whisper but everyone strained to hear what she said. "Let me tell you something, Dumbledore has just lost the one person who can save us all. Harry won't lift a finger to help you now, and I for one don't blame him."

Hermione started walking and her friends followed, wands drawn just in case.

Dumbledore was again forced to speak "Miss Granger, where are you going?"

"Back to Hogwarts."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"We made it down here on our own so I'm sure we'll make it back. Harry speaks for all of us. We neither want nor need the help of anyone here."

It was like the parting of the Red Sea as people stepped out of their way. They'd all seen Harry Potter's reaction to Voldemort threatening these kids. No one wanted to have Harry Potter that upset with them, so they were allowed to leave unchallenged.

As they made it into the lift, Ron was the first one to speak. "Hermione, please tell me you have a plan?"

"My plan consists of us all flooing to the Burrow and asking your parents for help. I know it's not much of a plan but it's all I can think of at the moment."

Hermione was close to tears when she felt Luna's arm going comfortingly around her. "Don't worry Hermione, Harry will be fine. Professor Dumbledore hasn't realised he's dealing with a different Harry Potter yet, he soon will."

"What do you mean Luna?"

"Well, apart from being a lot more comfortable in his own skin, he's more powerful too. He wandlessly healed Neville, Ginny and Ron before coming over to you. Hermione, when you got injured, Neville had to carry you around tonight. Yet now, not only are you healed, you're able to smack Professor Dumbledore one as well!"

Neville also had something to add. "He killed Bellatrix Lestrange too. Sirius Black fell through that veil thing and disappeared, Harry raced after him but was too late. He then chased Bellatrix and apparently fought you-know-who in the ministry atrium."

Hermione just kept repeating to herself Harry's private words from earlier. 'I will always need Hermione Jane Granger in my life, I'll find you wherever you are.' This was the only thing stopping the tears flowing. Harry would never lie to her. When he said something, he meant it!

At that, the lift doors opened at the atrium, an atrium that looked as if a tornado had swept through it in the last few hours. They used the destruction and chaos to quickly make their way unnoticed to the nearest public floo and headed for the Weasley home.

-oOoOo-

Albus finally got away from the ministry. Cornelius had insisted on some answers, answers which took the old wizard a while to provide. Remus Lupin though, was a lot more demanding and certainly more forthright than the current minister of magic had been. Albus was left in no doubt what Remus thought of his treatment of both Harry and Sirius. Remus also refused ever to work with Albus again, citing lack of trust on both their parts. It was only the injuries to Miss Tonks that stopped him leaving with Harry's friends. Not for the first time tonight, Albus emitted a sigh. He would need to check with Severus if the party of Harry's friends actually made it back to the castle, Minerva was still recovering in St Mungo's. Albus was sure that the job of retrieving Umbridge from the forbidden forest would also fall to him, that would have to wait though.

He was mentally preparing himself to confront an irate teenager, a teenager who owed Albus some answers. He called for the headmaster's office and stepped into the floo. Nothing could have prepared him for the devastation that awaited him there. Devastation

was the only thing that greeted Dumbledore in his office, Harry Potter was gone.

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 2

Harry landed in the headmaster's office and began verbally cursing up a storm. "Dumbledore, you whiskered, wrinkled wanker of a wizard! You just made a very big mistake, stupid old bastard..."

This outburst was halted by a cacophony of noise as the portraits of former headmasters vented their outrage at Harry, he recognised Phineas Black as being one of the most vociferous.

"Phineas Black, you do know that I am the new head of the Black family?"

"That doesn't matter whelp! My loyalty is always to the current headmaster of Hogwarts. How dare you speak about Albus Dumbledore in that manner, totally unworthy of a Black."

Harry stood just a little bit straighter as he gave his verdict on the matter. "Very well Phineas, you have made your position on this matter quite clear. Now I shall give you mine. I refuse to have a member of the Black family spying on me or providing aid to Dumbledore in any way. I will count to three and then destroy your portrait, I would advise you to leave it now."

For a portrait, Phineas made an admirable effort at displaying contempt for his new head of house. "You wouldn't dare boy. I've earned my place on this wall and have no intention of moving!"

Flames shot out of Harry's wand and incinerated the canvas in an instant. This action was also greeted by outrage from the other portraits. One female former headmaster who Harry didn't recognise was particularly scandalised by his actions, he really must make time to read 'Hogwarts a History'.

"You said you would count to three?"

"Yes I did, and I always keep my word. I never said anything about counting out loud though! I rather enjoyed that, anyone else want to defend Dumbledore?"

The portraits were all empty before any counting could even be started, Harry switched his attention to the sorting hat. "Well Alistair,

can you keep your mouth shut or do I need to throw you out the window?"

The tatty old hat quickly became animated and replied to Harry. "Am I to assume Mr Potter, that you want what happens here to remain unknown to our esteemed headmaster?"

Harry smiled back at the sorting hat. "Yes Alistair, I have no quarrel with you or Hogwarts. I still owe you and Fawkes for coming to my rescue in the chamber."

"If it doesn't endanger Hogwarts then I will happily comply. Albus sticks his big nose into far too many things that are none of his business. I quite enjoy watching him when he doesn't get his own way."

"Well Alistair, I'll do my best to provide you with entertainment for some time to come."

Harry called for Dobby, Winky and Kreacher. Three elves of very different dispositions appeared in the room. Dobby couldn't contain his excitement at having been called by Harry. Winky was sober but had her head lowered in shame, still considering herself a bad elf for being given clothes by her master. Kreacher, on the other hand, didn't try to hide his contempt and disgust at being called away from his beloved mistress by this half blood pretender. Were it not for his bond to the Black family making it impossible to refuse, he would not have answered the summons. This didn't mean that Kreacher had to like it, and he let everyone in the room know.

"Half blood has the nerve to call Kreacher? My mistress will be so angry this mongrel is claiming the head of our great family."

Harry had to physically restrain Dobby from attacking Kreacher, The enraged little guy looked ready to rip the old elf to shreds with his bare hands. Bad enough an elf should disrespect its master, but when that master was Harry Potter! Dobby's blood was boiling.

Harry spoke harshly to the old elf, demanding obedience and an answer. "Kreacher, I am your master now! Is that correct?"

The disgruntled elf fought with every fibre of his being not to answer but the powerful magic involved denied him that option. His 'yes

master' was uttered without the slightest trace of respect or enthusiasm.

Harry treated the elf with the same lack of respect, he'd given Kreacher a chance and now totally ignored the old elf. Harry turned to face the other two elves. "Dobby and Winky, would you like to leave Hogwarts and work for me?"

Dobby sprang at Harry and was hugging his leg, the face splitting grin giving its own answer. Winky though was more cautious. "Would Winky be a proper house elf again? Belong to a family? No wages?"

"Winky, whatever makes you and Dobby happy is fine with me." Harry then had a house elf hugging each leg. Harry started telling his new elves what he wanted. "I own a house at twelve Grimmauld Place, I want all my things taken from Hogwarts and placed there. Get my Firebolt only if you can do so without getting hurt, I don't know what traps that crazy bitch Umbridge might have set on it. As to the house, its not been looked after properly so will need a lot of work."

Harry still had his back to Kreacher as he said the next bit. "There are shrunken elf heads on the wall, I want them removed and disposed of. The painting of Walburga Black has to be taken down and burned, just like the one behind me."

This was too much for Kreacher to bear, taking his beloved mistress down could not be tolerated. Destroying her was unthinkable and unacceptable, mistress must be protected at all costs! With a squeal of pure hatred, the elf launched itself at the defiler of the proud Black name, Harry Potter. The instant Kreacher attacked his acknowledged master, his house elf bond demanded the ultimate price. The old elf dropped dead on the headmaster's carpet.

Dobby and Winky appeared more shocked that an elf would dare to attack its master, rather than the fact there was now a dead elf lying before them. Harry snapped them out of it by continuing to give instructions.

"The house has been used by the headmaster and his cronies, that stops now. Bar entry to all but those you know to be my friends at Hogwarts. Any stuff left there by the headmaster and his group I



want dumped in this office. The headmaster has locked me in here and I intend to make rather a mess before I escape, add anything you find to that mess. Don't worry, there will be enough work at Grimmauld Place to keep the both of you busy and happy for a while."

Deliberately making a mess went against their instincts but a direct order had been given. The promise of plenty work had them both smiling though Dobby had a question. "Harry Potter sir, you are locked in here? Dobby or Winky can easily get Harry Potter sir out of Dumbabum's office."

"Thanks Dobby, but I can easily get out of here myself. Besides, I also want to make a bit of a statement doing it. Albus Dumbledore is going to have quite the surprise waiting on him."

The two Happy elves popped off to begin their tasks as Harry now headed for the glass case containing the sword of Gryffindor. He was wondering what to do with Kreacher's body when he decided to include it in his message to Albus. A precise application of the levitation charm and one sticking charm later saw the dead elf framed on the wall, stuck over the recently incinerated portrait of Phineas Black.

He then levitated Dumbledore's massive solid oak desk off the floor before applying the same charm used on the golden wand that ended Bellatrix's reign of terror. The desk accelerated at great speed across the room and smashed into the heavy door. The desk and door were shattered beyond the power of any reparo spell to fix, blocks of masonry around the doorframe would also need replaced or repaired. Now he had an exit, Harry cast his next spell at a large bookcase. Every book on the shelves transfigured into a black, fluffy niffler who must have thought they'd reached niffler nirvana. The room was packed full of bright, shiny things that they fell upon like a horde of hungry locusts. Harry kept a tight hold on the sword as Dumbledore's office was stripped bare of anything that glittered, the nifflers began dragging everything they could get their paws on out the smashed door.

Harry spotted a silver glow coming from a cupboard and wondered why the nifflers hadn't taken that until he remembered what it was. With a wicked smirk on his face, Harry spoke out loud.

"Mum, you may want to look away now. Dad, Sirius, you're gonna love this!"

Harry pulled the stone bowl toward him while undoing his robes, he then began using Dumbledore's pensieve as a potty. The silvery swirling mist took on a distinctly golden hue as Harry chuckled with the thought of the next person to use it. He couldn't decide whether he wanted it to be Dumbledore or Snape being next to stick their face into the mist. Perhaps he would get really lucky and it would be both of them! Now he was relieved, it was time to leave. The nifflers had done their work and the room appeared as if Dudley and his gang, wielding cricket bats, had paid it a visit, this would do as a start. Harry suddenly realised what was missing from this tableaux, nothing was spray painted. He soon fixed that omission.

Severus Snape had heard and actually felt the crash shockwave within the castle, he was heading off to investigate. He stood there speechless as a swarm of nifflers raced along the corridor and past him, carrying off some of the headmaster's most treasured possessions. He was still trying to get his head around that vision when the Potter brat strolled along, Gryffindor's sword in his hand.

"Potter, I should have known you would be involved somehow. I'll see you expelled for this!"

Harry wasn't troubled in the slightest by the often-heard threat. "Ah Severus, so sorry to disappoint you yet again. I can guarantee you I will not be expelled for this. The good news, for both of us, is that I've already left Hogwarts."

Harry made to walk past Snape when he was grabbed by the arm. "Arrogant little prick, just like your father. You're stealing that sword Potter so I'm calling the aurors, arrested works for me just as well as expelled."

The potions professor suddenly found himself disarmed and dangling from the ceiling by his ankle. He'd mistakenly thought he'd seen the last of this particular spell. Severus attempted to scream at the brat, only to find a silencing charm had also been applied.

"A death eater calling the aurors to arrest someone? That's novel!" Harry was now right in Snape's upside-down face. "Just how long did you take to pass that message on tonight Severus? Were you

getting your jollies thinking we were all going to be killed by the time help arrived?" Harry refused to lose his temper at this arsehole. "You strut around Hogwarts as if you're some kind of super spy when really you're nothing more than a message boy for Albus and Tom. Both have you pegged as a petty little wizard, so petty he still carries a grudge against someone who's been dead for over a decade."

Harry was now giving a still silenced Snape the benefit of his version of an evil glare. "You did get one thing right though, I am just like my father. That means Lily Potter loves me with all her heart. Here's a newsflash for you Severus, she hates your guts for the despicable way you treated her son."

He could now see Snape's face producing colours that even his Uncle Vernon would be struggling to match. "I would love to stay and continue with our little chat but I, unlike you, have important things I need to do. I'll just say bye for now. I'd like it to be goodbye forever but you're just too stupid to let this go. It will end with me being forced to kill you, not something I look forward to but I won't hesitate either. I would do it now but as I said earlier, you're really not that important for me to bother with. I expect I'll see you later though."

With that, Harry walked off down the corridor. Whistling a merry tune while slashing the occasional imaginary foe with the magical sword. Severus was left dangling there, silenced and with his wand lying out of reach on the floor below him.

-oOoOo-

Albus couldn't believe the destruction in his office. That only one portrait was occupied left him with no one to ask questions of. The occupied portrait wasn't talking either, the elf contained within its frame would reveal no more secrets. It still provided information though, a dead Kreacher and the order of the phoenix paraphernalia scattered around the room told Albus he probably wouldn't be welcome at ... he couldn't remember! Harry must have had someone perform a fidelius charm on the house.

What really focused his attention though was the message painted on the wall, it was like the chamber of secrets all over again.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches

Don't force me to vanquish you Albus

That Harry discovered the prophecy in this manner was bad enough, that he could consider Albus Dumbledore as the dark lord of the prophecy was catastrophic! Albus was struggling to think how he could have marked the boy until he realised that he was being too literal with his interpretation. It was easy to see a scar and equate that with being marked as an equal but not all scars were visible. Harry would certainly consider being raised by the Dursleys as having marked him. Quirrell, Cedric and now Sirius's deaths had also undoubtedly left their mark on the boy. Albus was currently running the rest of the prophecy through his head.

He will have power the Dark Lord knows not

Harry certainly had displayed a power tonight that Albus had never seen before, the old wizard now felt as if someone had just walked over his grave as he remembered the next part.

Either must die at the hand of the other

Albus knew he was doomed. Since he couldn't bring himself to kill Tom Riddle, Albus couldn't imagine any circumstances that would see him deliberately killing Harry Potter. He had to find Harry and convince him that Tom was indeed the dark lord of the prophecy. If Harry vanquished Albus Dumbledore then he feared for the safety of their world.

Harry was a powerful wizard with a vast capacity to love. Should that love ever be turned into hatred, the world would tremble at the mere mention of Harry Potter's name.

He climbed over what was left of his desk to make his way out of the new exit to his office. Albus needed to find Harry, or at the very least some information.

He found Severus only minutes later but didn't like the information he heard, after he got his potions professor down from the ceiling.

"It was Potter! He left me dangling there for nearly an hour. The insolent brat made off down the corridor with the sword of Gryffindor.

I must leave immediately headmaster, the dark lord has been calling me and I was unable to answer. He doesn't like to be kept waiting." Snape then rushed off to get outside the wards.

Albus now headed directly to Gryffindor tower where he discovered the fifth year boy's dorm currently had only two students occupying it. Harry's trunk and things were also missing. A trip to the owlery also failed to bear any fruit as there was no sign of a certain distinctive snowy owl. It would appear Harry Potter had really left Hogwarts, for now.

-oOoOo-

Hermione awoke in a strange environment and it took her a moment to realise where she was, Ginny's room at the Burrow. Mrs Weasley had refused to let them return to Hogwarts last night. Since today was Saturday, there hadn't been any objections from the five students. A bit of supper later and they had all been shipped off to bed. That was when it all began to sink in for Hermione and the tears had started to fall. It was a still awake Luna who offered Hermione some words of comfort.

"Hermione, Harry will be in touch. It may take a while but he'd never leave his friends. He'd never leave you!" The blond witch lifted the Potter Quidditch jersey from where Hermione had neatly folded it and placed the precious item on the brunet's pyjama clad lap.

"The way Harry was performing magic tonight, he could have changed your ruined clothing into anything he wanted. He transformed them into something he loves for someone he loves. Hermione, he even put his name on the back!"

Hermione was clutching the jersey to her now as Luna continued. "Harry spoke to us all before he got to you. Yes he was a bit different but it's still the same Harry. He wasn't saying goodbye and he'd never leave without at least doing that."

Hermione had slept with her arms wrapped around that jersey, drawing comfort from it and Luna's words. Hermione was certain Luna was right about a couple of things at least, Harry loved Quidditch and had certainly given the jersey to her. Using the word love had just made the tingly feeling in her chest return, the same tingly feeling that Harry's touch had unleashed. She could hear

Ginny and Luna beginning to stir, it was time to get up and see what today would bring.

-oOoOo-

All the breakfasts inside the great hall lay largely forgotten as the students and staff devoured the latest issue of the Prophet. There was so much information that it was hard to know where to begin. All of them immediately focused on the fact that the supposed dead dark lord had been seen, making an appearance in the ministry of magic no less! That he fought Harry Potter and lost was also something to focus on but even that wasn't close to being the most startling revelation. That there was a prophecy proclaiming Harry Potter would be the one to finally defeat the dark lord would, under normal circumstances, have resulted in much cheering from most of the students. These however were anything but normal circumstances. Harry Potter was not only supposedly leaving Hogwarts, he was leaving their world.

Any eyes that scanned the Gryffindor table couldn't fail to notice Harry Potter was missing, seeing his closest friends weren't there either soon put names to those who had fought by his side. The paper didn't identify them yet and it would be lunchtime before the student body added Luna's name to that very exclusive and much talked about club.

That Sirius Black had died received about as much attention as their breakfast.

At the Slytherin table, there was a definite atmosphere of fear and apprehension in the air. The only other death eater named was the also deceased Bellatrix Lestrange, leaving most of them to worry if their parents were amongst the eleven mentioned as being captured. A glance at the staff table offered no comfort either.

The charges against Dumbledore had, of course now been dropped and he was once more headmaster. He was not seated at breakfast though. McGonagall was still in hospital but there was also no sign of the Hogwarts High Inquisitor either. Her squad knew the writing was on the wall and certain badges found their way off robes and into pockets. That the Slytherin head of house was also missing breakfast was yet another reason to worry.

Only knowing part of a story was stretching all their nerves to breaking point. Sometimes, ignorance actually was bliss.

-oOoOo-

The two men currently inside Hogwarts infirmary wouldn't agree with that sentiment. They needed knowledge as lives literally depended on it.

It was a rather the worse for wear Severus Snape who spoke to the headmaster. "The dark lord was in the foulest mood anyone could remember, no one escaped his wrath. Two were killed outright with another left a drooling imbecile. What in the name of Merlin happened last night?"

In lieu of an answer, Dumbledore just handed over his copy of this morning's Prophet. If things weren't so serious, it might have been amusing to watch Severus's eyebrows disappear into his hairline.

It was a thoroughly shaken Severus who asked his next question. "How much of this is fact?"

When Dumbledore admitted almost all of it, Severus now understood the dark lord's actions. "The dark lord killed two death eaters who couldn't heal the scar Potter gave him. I managed to brew a potion that at least stopped it weeping blood, nothing anyone tried managed to get the damned thing to close over. The dark lord is currently wearing a bandage like a common muggle and cursing everyone who comes within range of his wand. I pity the poor fool who has the unenviable task of bring today's Prophet to him. What can you tell me about this curse Albus? My life may rest on being able to treat this scar."

Again, Albus had nothing but bad news for his potions professor. "There was no curse spoken and no wand movement used Severus because Harry didn't use one. It appeared as if his rage got away from him and he struck Tom down with a bout of accidental magic."

Severus struggled to believe this except he'd seen the evidence with his own eyes. The scar was real and so was the dark lord's fear, this was not good. "Albus, do you think we could view the event in your pensieve? We have to discover how Potter did this."

Dumbledore agreed. "If you're well enough to leave the infirmary, I shall bring my pensieve to your office. I'm afraid Harry didn't leave a flat surface big enough to put the pensieve on, I believe the expression is he trashed the place. I need to sift through the wreckage for any clues before I can let the elves restore some order."

Both men headed off to watch something that could determine the outcome of this war. Albus knew Harry was playing a very dangerous game by making a false prophecy public, he could only hope it didn't come back to haunt the boy.

-oOoOo-

Since it was Saturday, Hermione didn't feel the slightest twinge of guilt from not being at Hogwarts today. Having already sat all her exams helped too. There had been very few questions asked of them last night, both Weasley parents recognising they'd been through quite the experience and were exhausted. That would certainly not be the case this morning.

The three girls quickly decided amongst themselves to tell them everything. Luna was dressed in some clothes borrowed from Ginny but nothing would part Hermione from her Potter jersey. That Harry hadn't conjured a bra was to be expected, and something she was going to have to live with until being reunited with her stuff currently at Hogwarts.

The girls beat the boys downstairs and were instantly aware that things were now very different from last night. The twins were studying the Daily Prophet intently, the way Molly and Arthur were staring at the girls clearly indicated they'd already read it.

The boys entered just as Fred quipped from behind the paper, "You lot couldn't let us have it, could you?"

George instantly backed his twin up. "Yeah, we pull the greatest prank Hogwarts has ever seen then you lot just have to go one better."

Both were still reading and obviously got to the same part at the same time. The paper was dropped and there was more than a hint



of awe in their voices. "Bloody hell, Hermione! Slapping Dumbledore?"

Fred couldn't hide his admiration, or his disappointment. "Way to go Hermione! I just wish I could have seen it."

Ron smiled at his friend. "Always said she was scary, brilliant but definitely scary."

Molly pulled the paper off the twins. "Where did you read that? It says no such thing!"

Fred pointed out the specific paragraph to his mother. "It says that after Dumbledore sent Harry back to Hogwarts against his wishes, one of Potter's friends struck the headmaster before leading the group of friends from the ministry."

George filled in the blanks for his parents. "Anyone doing our Harry harm will incur the wrath of the delectable Miss Granger here. Out of these five, who do you think would be the most likely to smack old Dumbledore one? Right in front of the minister of magic too."

All eyes turned toward Hermione. "What? Harry had just lost Sirius yet Dumbledore took him from the very people he needed to be near, his friends."

Remus arrived before anyone could answer that, he appeared very relieved to see them. "I'm so glad you came here instead of heading back to Hogwarts. Has anyone heard from Harry?"

Remus now had Hermione's full attention. "No, why? Isn't Harry still at Hogwarts?"

It was Arthur who provided the answer. "No, he upped and left. I floo-called Hogwarts last night to inform them you were all here and safe. Albus called back later to say that Harry had wrecked his office and left Severus dangling from a corridor ceiling..."

Arthur was forced to pause as the ministry five and the twins were now on their feet, cheering and dancing at that news. Hermione was instantly trying to work out just where Harry might have gone when Arthur resumed speaking.

"Albus thought Harry might make his way here and asked me to floo Hogwarts if he turns up."

The teens were already on their feet but all screamed 'NO!' in unison.

This verbal blast silenced Arthur so Hermione took the floor. "Mr Weasley, you can't do that. Dumbledore would come here and try to take Harry away again. Last night he basically kidnapped Harry, right in front of the minister of magic and nobody did a thing about it."

Molly attempted to intervene and defend the great wizard's reputation. "Albus said that Harry was suffering from grief, the poor boy watched Sirius die."

This was even worse than Hermione thought, Harry would be distraught. She wasn't about to stand here and listen to Molly trying to defend Dumbledore though, or his actions against Harry. "I agree that Harry must have been suffering from grief but what Dumbledore did was inexcusable. The best thing for dealing with grief is to be surrounded by your family and friends, everyone in this room falls into one of those categories where Harry's concerned. Yet what does Albus Bloody Dumbledore do? He takes him from us!"

Molly was trying to play the dual role of defending Dumbledore and placating a now upset Hermione. She didn't know one was feeding fuel to fire the other so carried on regardless. "Perhaps Albus sent him to Hogwarts for his safety? I'm sure he would have brought him here..."

Hermione wasn't about to be placated, she wasn't taking any prisoners either. "Oh, like he did when Harry faced Voldemort at the end of first year? Ron and the twins had to break the bars off his bedroom window to get him out the prison Dumbledore put him in. What about after facing Voldemort and a basilisk when he was twelve? No, he had to blow his aunt up and run away. Third year when we were nearly kissed by dementors? Nope! Surely after facing Voldemort again and watching Cedric murdered right in front of him? No yet again, and the old fool banned us from even writing to Harry!"

The silence was now deafening, Hermione had more than proved her point. Put like that, Dumbledore's actions were indefensible.

"Mrs Weasley, perhaps now you can see why I have no faith in Dumbledore where Harry's concerned. Dumbledore knew about that prophecy, his initials were on it yet he never told Harry. Had we known what Voldemort was after, we would never have been anywhere near the ministry last night, and Sirius would still be alive."

Remus rested his hand on Hermione's shoulder in a show of support, he wholeheartedly agreed with every word the young witch said. "Sirius and I weren't happy with the way Dumbledore treated Harry, don't even mention the Dursleys! Last night was the final straw for me. I resigned from the order and told Albus I want nothing more to do with him. I would have left with you lot but I had to care for Tonks. She's going to be confined to bed for a few days but will be ok. Sirius made Harry his heir so he's now head of both the Potter and Black families. That's not someone who should be Albus Dumbledore's little lap dog, trained to do his bidding."

Neville spoke nervously. "Em, sorry to interrupt but I only understood about half of that. Do you need me to leave so you can discuss this?"

Arthur was quick to put an end to that idea, Hermione's words had a powerful effect on head of the Weasley family. "Neville and Luna, I fear there has been far too many secrets kept here. It's time everything was out in the open. Harry has publicly said he's the chosen one, he'll need his friends now more than ever. I also think we need to include your gran and Luna's father in this, let them know your safe and invite them over. It won't be long before everything becomes public, I think they should hear it from you, rather than the prophet. Hermione, do you want me to contact your folks?"

Hermione had been on an emotional roller coaster since her history of magic exam yesterday. The thought of seeing her mum and dad was too strong a temptation to even think about turning the offer down.

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Minerva McGonagall had progressed to sitting up in her hospital bed. She was beginning to think the multiple potions the healers had her on were affecting her mind, she read today's Prophet for at least the third time. She didn't require one of Sybil's crystal balls to know that

most of the children involved in the battle at the ministry were her Gryffindor cubs. It was with a lump in her throat Minerva thought she might have to modify that assessment, it sounded as if they fought like fully-grown lions.

She was drawn from her reading when she noticed her room door opened, yet no one entered. Minerva was reaching toward the nightstand for her wand, that was until a rather large and beautiful basket of flowers appeared out of thin air. The flowers were soon followed by one of her favourite students, appearing from under an invisibility cloak.

"Hello Professor McGonagall, how are you feeling? Sorry about having to use the cloak to sneak in here, believe me when I say it was necessary. Oh, these are for you."

Minerva couldn't help but smile. "Mr Potter, thank you very much for the flowers, they're beautiful. I feel it is I who should be asking how you're feeling? I was very sorry to hear about Sirius."

With that last sentence, Harry was glad he came to see this woman. "Thank you professor, I appreciate your concern. I'm actually feeling ok about it. Yes I'm sorry to see him go but Sirius went down fighting and I believe he's in a better place now. Our loved ones never really leave us professor."

Harry was shocked to see that the stern facade of Professor McGonagall was in danger of cracking, she appeared close to tears. He quickly changed the subject.

"Oh Professor, you might wish to know that the last anyone saw of Umbridge, she was being carried deep into the forbidden forest by a herd of centaurs. They apparently didn't like her any more than we did! Umbridge may have looked like a toad but she squealed like a pig as they carried her away."

Minerva gave a little chuckle at that image. "Thank you for that Mr Potter, Dolores Umbridge getting what she deserves cheers me up no end. I have to ask though, what are you doing here?"

"Well I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to my favourite professor."

There was more than a hint of sadness in her voice as she replied. "So the Prophet was right about that, you're planning on leaving Hogwarts?"

"It's more than that professor, I plan to leave the magical world behind. It hasn't worked out as I had hoped, it's time to cut my losses. If I start now, I may still be able to achieve the muggle qualifications I need for university."

"While I'm delighted you're continuing your education, I can't tell you how sorry I am that you feel it necessary to leave the magical world to do it. Are you sure about this? What did Albus say about the matter?"

"I'm very sure about this professor, I now know what I want from life. Albus Dumbledore's opinion was neither asked for, nor would it be listened to. I know you've always tried to do your best for me, neither of us can say that where the headmaster is concerned. You were against leaving me with the Dursleys, for that alone I thank you. I'm making my own decisions from now on."

Harry realised that his voice had been getting rather harsh at the end so deliberately softened it for his next comment. "Like coming here to see the professor that not only put me on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, she bought me a Nimbus Two Thousand racing broom too! To this day, that still remains one of the kindest things anyone has ever done for me. I'm only sorry we couldn't make the Quidditch cup a permanent fixture in your office."

As they chatted, Minerva was trying very hard not to cry at the thought that this might be the last time she would ever see this outstanding young man. When Harry slipped on his cloak to leave, Minerva lost her battle and fat tears ran down her cheeks. She stared at the beautiful flowers Harry had brought for her, Minerva could always blame the pollen for her leaking eyes.

Harry left as Professor McGonagall began to cry. That the tears were for Harry Potter, her former student and not the-boy-who-lived or the-chosen-one was the reason Harry had visited in the first place.

-oOoOo-

Albus was left thinking his animation spell must have hit more than the gold elf since there was a golden mist floating through the air. Funny thing was, he couldn't remember ever experiencing a sense of smell when using a pensieve before.

Severus had just watched Potter expel the dark lord from his body, he had to grudgingly admit that was quite the achievement. When the dark lord threatened to go after Potter's friends, the power behind the boy's curse was awesome. Severus could see the dark lord was terrified, that scar would serve as a constant reminder of his fear. When he heard Potter spout off about protecting his friends, Severus's sneer was going full blast.

"Stupid, noble Gryffindor, he just handed everyone listening the key to defeating him. He clearly had the upper hand, why didn't he finish the job?"

"Harry claimed, and it really is hard to refute, that Fudge would have invented some charges and slapped him in Azkaban. As long as Voldemort lives, the ministry daren't move on him."

"That didn't help us discover how he did it, the dark lord is going to hate carrying Potter's mark. Especially now the entire country knows how he got it!"

Albus was too busy watching what he missed the first time, Harry removing the gold rod that killed Bellatrix and heading off to the lifts. It was time to leave.

The instant both wizards left the pensieve, it became rather obvious what the golden mist was. It certainly didn't come from any fountain!

The entire population of Hogwarts now knew Professor Snape was inside Hogwarts. His scream of rage must have been heard in every nook and cranny of the ancient castle. Harry's legend grew even more, Snape's scream of 'POTTER!' was of a volume that not even the Weasley twins had been able to achieve from the potions professor.

A/N Thanks for reading.

### Chapter 3

Ask anyone who knew Daniel Granger to describe the thirty nine year old dentist and words like stoic, steady, phlegmatic, conservative and dependable would surely be used. This Daniel Granger though, was having one hell of a morning and was barely hanging on to his emotions. His wife, Emma had already lost it and was gently crying while clinging tightly to their daughter. The reason for all this emotion was the couple were experiencing things not only beyond their control, they were beyond their understanding.

It had started with Arthur and one of Hermione's former professors arriving at their door, five minutes later they had literally 'popped' to Devon. If that wasn't weird enough, the sight of an older woman, resplendent in a hat that featured a stuffed vulture, exiting the fireplace greeted the dentists on their arrival. After a needy hug from their daughter and repeated assurances she was ok, the green flames of the fireplace spat out the most colourful character seen outside the woeful fashion disasters that were the mid nineteen seventies. This faux pas wasn't flares and perms though, this gentleman appeared to take his inspiration from Joseph's famous multi-coloured coat.

The term 'colourful' could also describe the language Dan had running through his head, he daredn't speak those words out loud in Emma's presence. He thought that he would be more than justified in using strong language after listening to what happened last night and some of the lead up to it. They'd just had to sit through Neville giving a description of Hermione being seriously injured, and Harry's severe reaction to it. Dan was jolted from his thoughts as the young lad began talking about Harry's godfather being killed and Harry racing after the murderer.

The company had been brought up to speed earlier on who Sirius Black was and his relationship to Harry, Dan couldn't help but think this poor kid couldn't seem to catch a break.

Neville had paused for a moment, clearly putting his thoughts in order so he could continue. Only Neville knew that he was deciding to tell the company everything. Harry's godfather was dead because of secrets being kept, he thought that the truth should be told.

He took out the golden wand and offered it to his grandmother. "Harry gave me this, he used it to make sure Bellatrix LeStrange had cast her last cruciatus curse on a Longbottom. I think he stuck it into her head."

This led to some gasps from the company but Neville carried on regardless. "Harry felt this should stay in the Longbottom family, it was also a peace offering for getting my dad's wand broken during the fight. I was so shocked when he gave me it that I never even noticed Harry healing my broken nose."

Augusta took the golden rod from her grandson, her expression a mixture of pride and awe. Hermione and Ron had led the initial part of the story, starting with Harry's vision to their escape from Umbridge and Hogwarts. Neville had taken over after that, surprising his gran with his demeanour almost as much as his actions inside the ministry. Where was the shy boy she'd sent to Hogwarts last September?

Ginny added her bit in support of Neville. "I know that might sound hard to believe but I never noticed or felt him healing my broken ankle either. When he spoke to us, Harry seemed to be more confident, self assured. Not something you can usually say about Harry."

Luna was nodding in agreement as she took up the narrative. "After he left us, Harry healed Ron before running over to Hermione. He must have really used some amount of magic on Hermione, she was easily the worst injured and we were really worried about her. We've no idea what he did though as Harry conjured privacy screens around them."

Hermione was very conscious that all eyes were now fixed on her, especially her parents. "I woke to Harry watching over me. First thing he did was berate me for getting myself injured, pot calling kettle black or what? I have to agree with Ginny, Harry appeared distinctly more self assured than normal. I got the impression he not only knew what was going to happen next but also was ready for it. He told me not to worry and that he would be in touch. I never got to say anymore because Dumbledore kidnapped him right out of the ministry with the minister of magic watching on."



Hermione had no intention of mentioning in front of her parents how she came to be wearing her Potter jersey, thankfully none of her friends mentioned it either.

Remus reflected the general opinion around the room in that he was in awe of how well these kids had handled themselves against the best Voldemort could bring. "I caught the altercation with the minister and would probably have hit Dumbledore if Hermione hadn't beat me to it. I would have been proud to walk out of there with you but had Tonks to take care of."

Dan was not one to talk about family matters outside of family, believing that those kinds of discussions should be done at home amongst the three of them. He was going to have to speak out here. Dan would readily admit that both he and Emma were totally out of their depth with these revelations. The father in him also realised that, where Harry Potter was concerned, he couldn't rely on Hermione to tell them the full truth. When it concerned Harry Potter, his daughter's objectivity wasn't just questionable, it was non-existent. She'd admitted that she was sure they were heading into a trap but went along with Harry anyway, that one they would save for later. He needed to know now how these events would affect his family.

"Hermione what does this mean for us? Does Harry leaving Hogwarts affect what you do next?"

Hermione had also decided that full disclosure was going to be the only way forward for her and her parents. "Dad, I honestly don't know. Hogwarts and Harry have been a massive part of my life for the last five years. Harry once said that there could be no Hogwarts without Hagrid. Whether there can be a Hogwarts for me without Harry is something that might take the entire summer to figure out. I do know that I don't want to return for the final week of term. I knew that the instant you and mum walked in the door, I want to go home."

Dan was happy and relieved at his daughter's answer until Neville's grandmother spoke. "It may not be as simple as deciding not to return in September Miss Granger. When an underage muggle born decides to leave the magical world, the ministry has the option of obliterating you and your family. Considering you slapped the Chief Mugwump in front of the minister, they may just exercise that option."

You have also made a lot of enemies amongst the pureblood supremacists by constantly outperforming their children and exposing their blood beliefs to be the nonsense that it is."

Both Granger parents were now really worried, the thought of someone magically messing with their minds appalled them. Hermione though had an answer. "I become an adult witch on the nineteenth of September. After that, they can't touch me. That's not even three weeks of Hogwarts, I could cope with three weeks."

Emma had been pretty quiet but now felt she had to ask the obvious question. "How can they do that to Hermione's memories but not Harry's?"

Augusta answered the clearly concerned mother, she knew her grandson thought very highly of Hermione. "Harry is not a muggle born, in fact he's head of the Potter and now Black families. The young man is politically, financially and now apparently magically a powerful force in our society. That he's chosen to turn his back on that very same society will send shock waves through every corner of it."

It was Xeno Lovegood who interrupted Augusta with a loud chuckle. He then proceeded to prove his sense of humour was nearly as colourful as his dress sense. "Augusta, I think it was Harry being the chosen one and telling them to basically bugger off that's really got their knickers in a knot. I also think Hermione, Ginny and my Luna could each have taken turns at slapping Dumbledore silly and still not be in any trouble with the ministry. One of my sources inside the ministry tells me you-know-who made the mistake of threatening Harry's friends. That same source also told me Harry wounded the dark lord and put him down, threatened him with a fate worse than death if he went anywhere near his friends. Scared the mighty Voldemort so badly that he portkeyed away. The point I'm making here is that Harry terrified all the ministry workers there too! Fudge is certainly stupid enough to order action taken against Hermione if she leaves before she's seventeen, whether he could find anyone willing to carry out those orders is another matter entirely."

Xeno directed his next remark specifically toward the Granger parents. "Your daughter is sitting there wearing Harry's Quidditch jersey, everyone knows what she means to the young wizard. Anyone wishing to do her harm is going to think at least twice before

they attempt anything, knowing they're likely to find Harry by her side the instant she's in any danger." He was genuinely trying to reassure them of her safety but Hermione knew there would be even more awkward questions when her mum and dad got her home after that.

Ron had been quiet all morning, he just couldn't get his head around Harry wanting to leave magic behind. This was worse though, something about Luna's father's remarks really got under his skin. As usual, Ron just blurted it out. "If Harry had you-know-who wounded and on the ground, why didn't he finish him off?"

Hermione was first to leap to Harry's defence. "I know you were out of it Ron but Harry explained that last night. While they need him to defeat Voldemort, the ministry won't touch him. They've already tried pinning a phony trial on him and Umbridge has been torturing Harry all year. Had Harry defeated Voldemort last night, Fudge would probably have him in Azkaban by now while either hushing the whole thing up or claiming all the credit. Malfoy would then have walked free and we would probably have found ourselves arrested instead."

Ron wasn't for giving up on this, it just wasn't in him to let Hermione have the last word. "If Harry can defeat you-know-who, then that's what he should have done. That's what I would have done. Nothing is more important than that."

Hermione was livid and made no attempt to hide it. "This from the boy who thought 'accio brains' was a good idea? Harry happens to think his friends are more important than killing someone, I happen to agree with him."

"Hermione Granger agrees with Harry Potter, oh there's a shock!"

Luna attempted to prevent this turning into one of their almost legendary arguments, arguments that were talked about even in the Ravenclaw dorm. "Ron, Harry put Voldemort down, not Dumbledore or Fudge but Harry. It was also Voldemort who ran away, well portkeyed but you know what I mean."

Ron wasn't about to be deflected from his course though. It would take more than facts to deter Ronald Weasley. "Harry should have finished him before he had the chance to portkey out of there." His

tone was almost daring Hermione to contradict him. She was more than up to the task.

Hermione had been wound tighter than any watch spring since Harry collapsed in the middle of his exam yesterday, she now had a target to let it all out on.

"Harry rid us of Bellatrix Lestrange and chased Voldemort out the ministry of magic but that's still not enough for some people. Harry's lost his parents and now his godfather but it's never enough, is it? He's been slandered all year in the press, at Hogwarts one professor had him carve letters into his own hand while another continually attacked his mind under Dumbledore's orders. Let's not forget to mention being handed a lifetime ban from the sport he loves, a ban he got defending your family from mouth Malfoy! Now even someone as thick as you are Ronald must be able to see why Harry's ready to leave Hogwarts and magic behind? I'm seriously considering doing the same myself!" Any witty comeback Ron had would have to wait as Hermione fled the room in tears, closely followed by her mum, Ginny and Luna.

Ron couldn't miss his parents and the twins glowering at him but was still not for backing down. "What? Absolutely mental that one!"

When the whack to the back of his head came, it was from a totally unexpected direction. Neville Longbottom. "Well I thought I would do it before Mr Granger knocked you into next week. Ron, in the five years you've argued with Hermione, I can't think of one single time when you were right. Hermione knows Harry better than anyone, if she thinks he's really leaving then I'm worried. Can you imagine Hogwarts without Harry?"

Arthurs gaze was boring into his youngest son with an intensity that could cut stone. "Do you and Hermione quarrel often?" That Ron couldn't look him in the eye was all the answer that Arthur needed. "That young lady is extremely worried about Harry. You remember Harry, your best friend? She doesn't need her other best friend making things worse for her, and for no other reason than to be obstinate! You all survived last night by sticking together and that's what you need to do now. You will go and find Hermione to apologise for being an insensitive arse. Go, now!"

Ron found himself with a twin on either arm. "Don't worry dad, we'll take care of this."

"If Ron doesn't do this properly, he'll be out test subject all summer."

They dragged him out of there, Neville following along so he wasn't left alone with the adults.

Molly apologised to Dan for her son's behaviour. "I'm sorry about that, they really think the world of each other. The three of them have been very close since first year."

"Yes I know. It's been a bit disconcerting as a father to hear your only daughter talk continually about two boys since she was twelve. I keep expecting for one of them to be getting introduced as her boyfriend!"

There had been a lot of honesty expressed here today so Molly decided to continue with the theme. "I know what you mean, I had hoped that one day she and Ron might get together but I think Hermione's already made her choice. Judging from that top she was wearing, so has Harry."

This confused Dan until Remus helped him out. "Hermione was injured by a curse that burned a slash through her clothes and into her body. I have no idea how Harry healed her but it was quite the feat of magic and beyond the capabilities of anyone else in this room. Not content with that, he transfigured her ruined clothes into his Quidditch team jersey. That's why it's got his name on the back. Harry's been on the team for five year and knows male players normally only give their jersey to their girlfriends."

"Why hasn't Hermione said anything about this?"

Remus actually smiled, his first since watching his friend pass through the veil. He knew Sirius was hoping Harry would get his head out his arse and ask Hermione out. Sirius intended to talk to his godson about it this summer if nothing had happened by then. "I'm sure it's a new development. Harry and your daughter are very close, it's very easy for us to believe Neville when he said how Hermione's injury really affected Harry. Within the same evening, Harry watched as his godfather was murdered. I'm convinced something changed within Harry last night, I saw it in his eyes as he

chased after Bellatrix. There was a determination and confidence there that saw him through last night."

He tried to explain it further to the non-magical parent. "Hermione was the brightest student I taught at Hogwarts but Harry was the most powerful, casting a corporal patronus at thirteen is unheard of. Together those two make quite the pair."

"So Harry's her boyfriend?"

Remus shook his head. "I don't think so, at least not yet. Watching them in third year I thought it was only a matter of time. Harry wasn't raised in the best of environments and is not good at showing his emotions, I think last night he finally figured it out. Unfortunately, they never got any time to discuss it. Your daughter is going to be the cause of young witches hearts being broken up and down the country. For what it's worth, in my opinion they'll make a great couple."

Dan would certainly be having a talk with Hermione when they got home.

Emma was currently doing that very thing. "I'm sorry about that mum, I'm so worried over Harry and Ron just pushed my buttons. It's almost as if he enjoys arguing with me. If only there was a way to contact Harry, I won't be able to settle until I know he's safe..."

As she said that, it was like a light bulb going off in Hermione's head. There was one person who would be as concerned about Harry as she was. More importantly, this person might be able to contact him. "Dobby!"

The little elf appeared with a loud pop, almost scaring the life out of Emma.

"Harry Potter's Grangy is calling for Dobby? How can Dobby help?"

Hermione had quite a few questions but stumbled out the most important ones for now. "Dobby, how's Harry? Where's Harry? Do you know?"

The little guy was nodding his head so much, his ears were flapping like Dumbo. "Harry Potter sir is fine, he went to visit professor kitty in

the hospital. Harry Potter's Grangy is not to worry, Dobby and Winky will take good care of Harry Potter. Would you like Dobby and Winky to fetch your things from Hogwarts like we did for Harry Potter sir?"

Luna answered as Hermione appeared deep in thought. "Oh Dobby, that would be lovely..." She didn't get to say anymore as Dobby was gone.

Ginny looked nearly as puzzled as Hermione, she was also someone who knew Harry's behaviour well and this didn't fit any known pattern. "When he knows everyone will be looking for him, why would Harry risk going to see McGonagall?"

This light bulb wasn't as welcome to Hermione as her Dobby idea. "Oh shit, shit, shit! He went there to say goodbye. Harry really is leaving."

Hermione was rapidly getting herself into a state when a hand on her shoulder pulled her back. Luna was again offering comfort. "You may be right Hermione, I think you are, but I still say you're worrying about the wrong thing. Even the elf knows you're Harry Potter's Grangy! Harry may not be going back to Hogwarts but he's not about to give that up."

Ron and his escort had arrived just as Dobby left, catching the end of the conversation. "Bloody Hell! If Harry's saying goodbye to McGonagall, then he really must be leaving!"

The sarcasm in Ginny's reply sliced through Ron's indignation that he was right. "Finally getting it Ron? I was beginning to think those brains had done some permanent damage to that thick skull of yours. It's time to face facts here, at the very least we're looking at Hogwarts without Harry!"

Hermione was in tears and shot into a surprised Ron's arms. "Oh Ron, what are we going to do if he doesn't come back?"

Ron appeared to have as much a clue about that as he did about how to deal with the crying female who was now clinging to him. At any other time, his priceless expression would have been very funny. This though was very, very serious.

It was Neville who once more knew what was needed. He hugged both Ron and Hermione as he replied. "We'll get by if we all stick together, Harry taught us that's when we're at our strongest!"

Ginny and Luna were also included in what had become a group hug. Fred and George shrugged their shoulders.

"If you can't beat them."

"Join them!"

The twins joined in, managing to resist the multiple opportunities for pranks the situation presented.

Emma was close to tears herself as she watched her daughter being comforted by seven friends. She believed Neville was right up to a point, they were stronger together but Hermione obviously needed Harry. She didn't need to be her mother to work that one out.

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Cornelius Fudge was being forced to face up to a magical Britain without Harry Potter in it, the minister of magic was not liking the conclusions he was coming to. To Fudge, it didn't matter whether Harry Potter was indeed the chosen one. The wizarding public believed he was and there lay the minister's biggest problem.

Far too many people heard the lad give his reasons for leaving, keeping that quiet was never going to work. That you-know-who was undoubtedly back took the urgency of the problem to a whole new level. The ministry didn't have the luxury of sitting back and seeing what way the wind was going to blow. If they didn't take some swift, decisive action then heads would roll at the ministry. Worse still, there was a high probability that the head rolling would start at the top.

After that trial, vilifying the boy for a year in the press and allowing Dolores free rein at Hogwarts, how the hell was he supposed to get the lad back onside?

Fudge had written all Potter's complaints down in list form and was determined to work his way through them. He didn't think for one second it would change the boy's mind, that wasn't the purpose here.



When the public threw this in his face, Cornelius was enough of a politician to know he'd better have some answers for them.

There could be no deals for the people captured in the ministry last night, full death eater regalia and unforgivable curses on their wands would see to that. Anyone claiming they were under the imperious curse would be offered public trial under truth serum. If Lucius was as innocent as he claimed, here was his chance to prove it. There would be no trials for those death eaters who had already escaped from Azkaban, they were going to be passed through the veil. Dolohov, Rookwood, Mulciber and the LeStrange brothers would be sacrificed to the tough new stance the ministry was taking on death eaters. With that psycho Bellatrix gone too, that should buy Cornelius some time with the public.

He also decided then and there to reward the students who brought these criminals to justice. Handing out medals and financial rewards at the Hogwarts opening feast in September would give him some much needed positive public exposure in case Potter actually left. The minister would be able to hold his hands up and say he was doing his best.

Sirius Black now being dead made it very easy for Cornelius to deal with this particular problem. 'New evidence has come to light which proves Sirius Black was innocent and the real culprit was Peter Pettigrew' sounded good to him. Pettigrew would be stripped of his order of Merlin and a warrant issued for his arrest. Again Fudge didn't care whether this was true or not, he was sure this was a win-win situation for him. If Black really were innocent then the ministry wouldn't look like idiots when Pettigrew was captured. If not, then Pettigrew was already dead and no threat to Cornelius's plans.

The problem that carried the potential to inflict the most damage on him was Dolores, he would have to quietly cut her loose. It was no secret that Amelia Bones loathed Dolores so perhaps allowing the head of the DMLE to investigate Potter's claims could remove his undersecretary from the ministry. He would vermanently deny anything and everything Dolores attempted to push in his direction, safe in the knowledge that she would never willingly submit to being questioned under truth serum. Fudge would block all efforts to force that particular issue.

Cornelius was quite pleased with himself. With these measures in place, he should be able to deflect most of the fallout from this situation. Should Potter carry-out his treat to leave the magical world, there would be enough shit hitting the fan to bury everyone. Not even Dumbledore would come out of this smelling of roses.

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It was dinnertime before either the headmaster or the head of Slytherin were seen by anyone inside the castle. When people did eventually lay eyes on them, the double takes were perfectly understandable. Disputes on just who provided the biggest shock would be the main topic of debate in all four common rooms, and the staff room that evening.

Albus Dumbledore had cut his hair and trimmed his beard for the first time in living memory. Whether that was more shocking than Severus Snape actually washing his greasy locks was the cause of all the debate. There was no debate as to who was responsible for these phenomenons. Harry Potter's name being screamed at previously unattained volume by a certain potions professor provided the answer to anyone with a modicum of intelligence. The rumours of just how or what he did to achieve these miracles would get wilder and weirder as the final week of school progressed. Sadly, but not surprisingly, no one even came close to guessing the truth.

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Hermione awoke next morning in her own bed, still clutching Harry's Quidditch jersey. She knew this was lame but felt closer to him by doing so. Her rational side appeared to be getting hammered into submission by her hormones but Hermione didn't care. If wearing Harry's jersey made her feel better then that's what she would do, rationality could go and jump in the nearest lake.

Hermione thought she must be experiencing some of what Harry must have felt when she got badly injured, the thought of never seeing him again was eating her alive. She'd temporarily dodged a bullet yesterday when her parents told her just to relax, give her time to recover from those traumatic events. The questions would undoubtedly be coming in her direction today.

Hermione had already resolved to answer them as truthfully as she could. Breakfast at the Grangers could easily run into lunch, probably dinner too if her mum and dad asked all the right questions.

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Breakfast that morning at Hogwarts was also eventful. Today's prophet had more details as to what six Hogwarts students had achieved at the ministry on Friday night. It also named the eleven death eaters captured, and their punishments.

Draco's face wore a gold medal worthy scowl, his father was named as a death eater and being sent to Azkaban. This really emphasized the major changes that were being proposed to combat the return of the dark lord. What use was the Malfoy name and money if it couldn't keep you out of Azkaban?

Everyone was as equally enthralled in the newspaper as they were yesterday. Sirius Black declared innocent, previously convicted death eaters put through the veil of death and the rest sent to Azkaban. That three of them had sons currently sitting at the Slytherin table just added extra spice to the story.

The minister went out of his way to claim he was receiving bad advice from his advisors. He also deliberately pointed out that Lucius Malfoy was on his way to Azkaban while Dolores Umbridge was currently under investigation by the DMLE. As to the Sirius Black issue, he truthfully said it was a situation he had inherited but could have handled better. He was trying to make amends now by issuing a full pardon and pledged to leave no stone unturned in the ministry's attempts to find Pettigrew. He also promised rewards for the six students who had fought so bravely against a dozen death eaters and exposed that you-know-who had indeed returned. Hogwarts would be contacted soon and it was hoped there could be a ceremony at the start of the new school term.

Reading this was the final straw for Draco Malfoy. His father was in prison, the chosen one Potter had not only stolen his Black inheritance but now scarhead's group of misfits were going to be rewarded. He couldn't even get any release by baiting the people responsible for these injustices, since none of them had returned to Hogwarts.

Draco's dramatic departure didn't receive the attention the blond ponce thought it should, this was due to all eyes watching as a pair of owls delivered bouquets of yellow roses to two lucky girls. That the two identical bouquets came from the same person was assumed by everyone in the hall who were now frantically attempting to work out what Cho Chang and Parvati Patil had in common. Well, apart from the fact that the two girls were now crying buckets.

Lavender had her arm comfortingly around her best friend but she was also reading the note that accompanied the roses. Her gasp of 'Harry's really leaving' had Dumbledore out his seat a lot sprightlier than his great years would suggest.

"Miss Patil, could I read your note please?"

Parvati stood and threw the note at the headmaster. "What did you do to Harry that would make him leave? He put up with Snape and Umbridge so it must be really bad if he's not coming back now!" She gently picked up her bouquet before snatching her note out of the still reading headmaster's hands. "I'll take that headmaster, it's all I've got to remind me of a friend I shared classes with for five years and who took me to my first ball."

Parvati was joined by her sister and Lavender as she began walking out the great hall with her head held high, the flowers from Harry cradled lovingly in her arms. He'd asked in his note for forgiveness because he made her first ball miserable due to his inexcusable behaviour. Parvati chose to remember instead their first dance and being the centre of attention, of course she forgave him.

Cho's letter had been very similar, apologising for their disaster of a date and asking for forgiveness. The line where Harry said that he was leaving the magical world and didn't want to do so with any bad feeling still between them started the tears falling. He'd also asked her for a favour, a favour she had every intention of granting. Cho now stood with her flowers, striking a pose very similar to Parvati's. "I'll save you the trouble of walking over here headmaster, you won't be reading my note. You have now taken both my boyfriends away from me, you won't be touching this!"

Snape shouted from the top table. "Fifty points from Ravenclaw and detention with me every night this week Miss Chang. We'll see if we

can knock the Potter arrogance out of you before you head home for the summer."

Severus suddenly found himself facing an irate Filius Flitwick, standing on the staff table right in front of him. "One hundred points to Ravenclaw Miss Chang for having the courage to speak the truth. Oh and Professor Snape, she will be unable to attend any detentions as I'm holding house meetings every night this week in the Ravenclaw dorm and I expect all my students to be there. I will of course listen to your complaints against any of my students who you decide in your wisdom deserve detention from you this week."

Severus was already in a stinker of a mood from Potter's pensive prank and so wanted to take this further. Unfortunately, Filius already had his wand in his hand and only a fool would mess with an angry duelling master. He gave the barest nods of his head in compliance.

Pomona Sprout was almost hoping Severus was going to make a play against Filius, she would have enjoyed watching her friend destroy the Slytherin's unjustified high opinion of himself. She now had to act to protect her own house from the bat's retribution. "Hufflepuff's, same applies to you. There has been a lot happening this year at Hogwarts and I think it will be good to sit and clear the air."

This left the Gryffindors exposed to the potion master's wrath, but not for long.

"Gryffindors, yeh've got me fer the final week. We'll have the same meetings."

This actually resulted in cheers from the Gryffindor table, Hagrid had just returned to Hogwarts that morning. The gentle giant held his hands up for quiet, he apparently had something else to say.

Hagrid directed his remarks toward the two girls carrying the flowers, both had stopped in the hope that Flitwick was going to make mincemeat out of Snape. Who would want to miss that? "Cho, Parvati, yeh're in good company. I visited Professor McGonagall at St Mungo's last night an' wasn't the only visitor she saw yesterday. 'Arry stopped by with flowers an' to say goodbye, he won't be comin' back to Hogwarts." Hagrid unashamedly had tears in his eyes now.

Dumbledore was stunned, his two strongest supporters inside Hogwarts were Hagrid and Minerva yet they kept this from him? "Hagrid, why didn't you tell me this news earlier?"

"What? I don't see anybody dyin' 'cause I chose to have me breakfast first!"

That hit Dumbledore like a sledgehammer, he was going to be blamed for Harry leaving Hogwarts and the magical world. While Cornelius worked like a demon to cover his ministerial arse, Albus had two black marks against him that he couldn't refute. He had deliberately withheld the prophecy from Harry and Sirius was now dead. When he read Miss Patel's note from Harry, the lad had placed no blame on any individual as a reason for him leaving. If the students and staff of Hogwarts were reaching that conclusion on their own, the rest of the British magical community wouldn't be far behind.

Albus headed for his office, his breakfast now forgotten. Had he really misread young Harry so badly for all these years? The Harry Potter that Albus thought he knew should be battering down his office door and begging for training to defeat the dark lord, not shrugging his shoulders and saying 'so long!' It would appear that the combination of the Dursleys, Dolores Umbrige's ministrations, Severus remedial potions lessons, Miss Granger's severe injury and Sirius's death had a profound effect on the boy. His killing of Bellatrix, defeating Tom and then healing Miss Granger were all acts Albus would have sworn were beyond the boy's capabilities. Could Harry have found the power the dark lord knows not? He had certainly never seen anything like whatever that was Harry hit Tom with.

For a man who didn't choose his robes in the morning without a plan of action, Albus had no idea what to do next. Every single contingency he had carefully crafted over the last fifteen years involved Harry Potter to some degree or another. Without Harry Potter, the situation was hopeless. That Harry understood this but was leaving anyway left Albus floundering for an explanation. No matter what it took, he would have to find Harry and make him understand. He simply had to return, the alternative was unthinkable.

-oOoOo-

Breakfast may be over but the interrogation was just about to begin. Hermione understood at once that her parents had talked about this when her father wadded right into the very heart of the matter.

"Hermione, I'd like to know just what your relationship is with Harry. I'd also appreciate an honest answer."

"Harry is my best friend and a very big part of my life. We are not romantically involved, having the occasional hug or kiss on the cheek is the extent of any romantic contact."

Emma was watching her daughter carefully and could sense she was telling the truth, it also wasn't hard to sense what she wasn't saying. That Hermione was sitting there wearing her Potter jersey again was rather a big clue. "You may not be romantically involved with Harry but I get the distinct impression you want to be?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at that. "Mum, half the witches at Hogwarts want to be romantically involved with Harry Potter."

"Ah, but how many of them are wearing his jersey?"

"Its complicated mum, Harry's my best friend and I can't ever imagine my life without him in it. If we tried dating and it didn't work out, I couldn't stand to lose what we have now."

Dan had allowed Emma to take the lead but he needed to know something here. "Hermione, why wouldn't it work out?"

"As I said to mum, half the witches in Hogwarts want Harry. I can't compete with that."

Emma came right back at her daughter. "As I said, and you never answered, how many of them are wearing his jersey?"

Hermione had her head down to try and hide her blush as she softly answered. "None."

Her dad lifted her chin up as he spoke. "Hermione, we've had five years of your letters featuring Harry and you talk about him all summer, this is not a surprise to us. What I really want to know is

when are we going to meet him? Your mum and I also need to know how his future plans affect you?"

Hermione tried not to think of how Harry would react to that. He wasn't even her boyfriend, yet her dad appeared ready to ask him what his intentions were toward her. "Dad, I have no idea where Harry is at the moment, I'm forced to wait until he contacts me."

Dan's face was now fixed in a frown. "Hermione, I'm not really pleased with that answer, or this situation. I don't think it's fair that you are left hanging like this. What about that little chap who got your stuff from Hogwarts yesterday? Call him, even if it's only to pass on a message."

Hermione had been thinking of nothing else since yesterday. Her only objection was that Harry must have a good reason for not contacting her. She would hate to place him in any danger over her insecurities. She tried to explain this but her dad wasn't buying it. Hermione understood this was partly her fault for hiding just how dangerous the magical side of Britain could be. As her dad became more insistent, she consoled herself with the fact that this was something she was desperate to do anyway.

"Dobby!"

Nothing happened for a few minutes and Hermione was considering calling for Winky when a bouquet of long stemmed red roses appeared on the table. There was also a note attached. Hermione had the roses in her lap before she opened the note and read it out loud.

Hermione

Your house is currently being watched but neither you nor your parents are in any danger. I have some very important things I have to do and will tell you everything when I can, prepare to be up all night talking! These tasks might take a few weeks but I don't want you to worry, Hedwig is far too conspicuous so I'll use other means to drop you notes. Please act as you would normally do while on holiday from Hogwarts and trust that I will find you wherever you are.

Missing you like crazy



## Love Harry

Dan was now angry, but the target of that anger was not Harry. "Watching our house? Who the hell do these people think they are? How sure are you that Harry's right and we're in no danger?"

The beautiful roses and the way Harry had signed her note had Hermione feeling better than she had in months. Harry always told the truth, he was missing her and loved her, she had the proof in her hand. Hermione now had a wide smile on her face that nothing was going to shift.

"Dad, I'm certain we're in no danger. If we were, Harry would already be here, wand in hand and dealing with the bad guys. You think I would follow Harry wherever he leads and you're probably right. What you fail to understand is that Harry is the exact same with me. I wasn't being flippant or making jokes just now dad. If there was any danger then you would soon get to meet Harry, so would the people putting us in danger. My guess would be they're from the ministry or Dumbledore's people."

Dan still wanted more information. "Are they there for our protection? What do we need protecting from?"

"More than likely they're staking us out in the hope of capturing Harry when he contacts me. I suppose them being there does lessen the likelihood of a death eater attack."

It was her mother who was now demanding answers. "Hermione, I think it's time your father and I heard the truth about what's really going on in the magical side of Britain. Not the heavily edited version we usually hear."

It was time for a tale of trolls, basilisks, dementors, dragons and Dolores. Today was going to be a late lunch but one glance at her roses and Hermione's spirit soared.

-oOoOo-

The Dursleys were just about to sit down to their Sunday lunch when the doorbell disturbed them. Not half as much though as when Petunia opened the door.

"What are you doing here? You're early!"

"Hello to you too Aunt Petunia. I'm not staying, I just popped in to say cheerio and save you the drive to Kings Cross next week. I need to talk to you and Uncle Vernon, then you'll never see me again. Dudley still at school?"

Petunia could only nod at the well dressed young man in front of her. It wasn't just the clothes that made her nephew appear so different, he also wore a whole new confident attitude. He walked past her and headed straight for the dining room.

"Hi Uncle Vernon, please don't get up on my account. I've got something to say and then I'll be out of your lives forever."

This sounded very much like something Vernon wanted to hear so he said nothing, for now.

"My godfather was murdered the other night and it affects the Dursleys indirectly. He had made me his heir so now I'm considered an adult in the magical world. This means I never have to return to Privet Drive, it also means the protection that me staying here gave this house will also be disappearing. My advice would be for you to move home in case the death eaters come calling. These animals would take great pleasure in torturing the entire Dursley family to death. One of them killed my godfather."

Vernon as all set to begin one of his 'freaks' rants when Petunia interrupted him. "What happened to this person, surely they were arrested?"

"No, she wasn't arrested, they don't arrest dead people. I made sure she'd never harm anyone ever again."

One glance at this new version of Potter and anything Vernon had to say died in his throat.

Harry just turned and walked out the door, he'd warned them and that was what he came for. Harry had dreamed about walking out of Privet Drive and never coming back since he was a young boy. Now it was finally here, it was strangely anticlimactic. Anyone watching the young man walking down the street would think he was talking to himself.

"Everyone gets a chance guys, even the Dursleys. Whether Vernon will pull his head out his fat arse and actually do something about the situation is another matter. I find that I don't really care, does that make me a bad person mum?" Harry walked around the corner, putting that part of his life behind him forever.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 4

The girl sat on a tree stump, armed with her sketchbook, in the middle of an idyllic Devonshire countryside setting. Between the babbling brook, beautiful bird song and the abundance, not to mention diversity, of wild flowers, the meadow was a feast for all the senses. The boy silently watching the scene before him though was only interested in the girl, how peaceful and 'right' she appeared in this setting. He was disturbed from his musings by the girl speaking to him. That he was currently invisible while Luna had her back to him made this action all the stranger.

"Are you here to say goodbye Harry, or are you just going to stand there and watch me all day?"

Harry made himself visible before answering his friend. "I could quite easily stand here all day and just watch you sketch Luna, that would be anything but a hardship. I definitely have no intention of saying goodbye. I don't have enough good friends that I can afford to say goodbye to them. You, Luna Lovegood, are certainly a good friend. I may be leaving Hogwarts and magic behind, my friends are more important than that. It might be hard to keep in touch for a while but I hope I'm worth the effort, I know you are."

Luna had now turned to face him, a lovely smile lighting up her face. "I'm glad to hear you say that Harry, very glad. I don't have many friends and can't afford to lose any of them. I seem to have gained one though, you wouldn't know why Cho Chang wrote to me? She apologised for her past behaviour and hoped we could be friends when I go back to Hogwarts."

Harry was pleased his idea had worked. "I wrote to her and apologised for our disaster of a date. I left her on Valentine's Day so I could meet with you and Hermione, I can't even remember if I told her Rita Skeeter was going to be there. No wonder she was pissed at us. I just wanted Cho to understand that you are one of my best friends and in no way responsible for what happened that day."

"Well I think she took it to heart so thank you. Cho did ask me a question though, what did you do to Snape and Dumbledore? Apparently the whole castle heard Snape scream your name in anger. Next time they were seen, Dumbledore had cut his hair while Snape had washed his."

Harry let out a loud whoop before grabbing Luna off her feet and dancing about the meadow in pure jubilation. "Both of them, I got both of them? Oh, that has so made my day, thank you Luna."

Luna found herself in Harry's arms, being twirled around in celebration with both feet off the ground. Not that she was complaining, Hermione was a lucky girl. Well, she was going to be soon.

"I'm glad you're happy Harry, perhaps you could tell me why?"

Harry was now embarrassed. "Well, have you ever had one of those urges that you knew was wrong but just couldn't resist?"

Luna was in Harry's arms, staring into his eyes from a distance of a few inches. By way of an answer, she closed the gap and kissed him. "Like that you mean? I'll tell myself that you're not Hermione's boyfriend yet, but I know it was still wrong."

Harry smiled at probably the only girl who could get away with that move on him. There was no malice or ulterior motive behind the kiss, she just wanted to kiss him and did it. "I would say exactly like that Luna. Even though I knew what I did was wrong, I still enjoyed it very much."

Harry then got to witness a new phenomenon, Luna was still smiling but now blushing like a Weasley. "Do you know what a pensieve is Luna?" Her nod allowed Harry to continue. "When I wrecked Dumbledore's office, I found his."

There then followed a lengthy pause, only being broken when Luna urged him to continue. "I had a pee in Dumbledore's pensieve!"

Harry still had his arms around Luna and it was probably just as well, she would have ended up on the grass as the laughter burst out of her. She was clinging to him as the laughter rolled off her. Just when he thought it might be under control, she would look at him and burst out laughing again. It took a while before both of them ended up sitting side by side in the spot where Harry had found her, her sketchpad lying on the grass.

Luna rested her head on Harry's shoulder, this was nice. Luna had a crush on Harry ever since she first met him, it soon became obvious though that those feelings weren't returned. Luna had the consolation of knowing that it was not because of her. Harry definitely liked her, might even love her, just not like that. Hermione was the one who owned his heart. Luna was ok with that, her friends deserved to be happy. At least she could say her first kiss was with Harry Potter, that meant a lot to her. That Harry appeared to understand her feelings helped enormously, it could have been very awkward if Harry had reacted differently. She'd taken a liberty and Harry had allowed it, as a friend. Luna liked the kiss, and sitting here now with him close, she would have to start looking for a boyfriend of her own. It was time to face why Harry was here.

"Harry, I understand what you said earlier but I'm worried. How can we stay friends if we don't see each other?"

Harry was also enjoying sitting here with Luna, her head on his shoulder and his arm around her. It was so peaceful, he almost didn't want to answer and break the spell. "I won't lie to you Luna and say it will be easy but, if it's something we both want, I think we'll manage. I have quite a lot going on at the moment and it will be later on in the summer before I know for definite what I'll be doing."

"Until you speak to Hermione?"

Harry didn't blush and answered his friend truthfully. "Yes Luna, that will play a big part. Can I ask you to contact Hermione and tell her that we spoke? I want to have all my ideas and options lined up before I speak to her, that's still a few weeks away."

"Is there anything specific you'd like me to tell her for you?"

Harry looked at his friend and remembered how she'd stood by him, fighting at his side. He knew more about Luna than she thought, it was again time to use his knowledge to help those he cared about. "If I know Hermione, she'll be worrying herself sick over me and won't stop until she can see I'm ok for herself. Tell her I'm not hiding away, grieving over Sirius. I'm trying to organise my life so I can live it in such a way as to make him proud of me. The people we love never truly leave us Luna, they watch over us and someday we'll get to see them again."

Luna was now gazing at her friend in wonder as he continued, she so hoped that Harry was right.

"Our mothers are watching over us Luna and are very happy with what they see. Please tell your dad that Sweden is a bust. Fair Isle, between Orkney and Shetland, is probably your best bet. Go with red onions to entice them out from their lairs, garlic is a tad on the strong side."

Luna's eyes were almost the size of Dobby's as she asked the question she really wanted the answer to. "Harry, did you cross over?"

"Only for an instant Luna, but what an instant. I was thinking of staying but my parents and godfather didn't want me there for at least another hundred years or so. My mum gave her life that I could live, neither of my parents regretted that decision. You sat with your mum as she died and it's tormented you ever since, blaming yourself for not helping her. Your mum was beyond help Luna but she got to spend her last moments having her hand held by the most precious thing in the world to her. You could do no more and it was more than enough."

Large tears were silently running down Luna's cheeks as the scene that had tortured her since that fateful day played over in her mind. Knowing that her mother didn't hold her to any blame lifted such a weight of her young shoulders. It was like being reborn.

"Luna, I plan on telling only one other person what happened to me. You needed to know so I could pass the message on from your mother. She wants her little girl to start living her life to the full."

Luna could barely speak and it took three attempts but Harry managed to figure it out. "You met my mum?"

"Maia is so like her daughter, very caring and very beautiful. She doesn't want you fretting for the rest of your life over something that was an unfortunate accident."

Luna held him tight for a moment before speaking. "Thank you Harry, you have no idea what this means to me."

He kissed her gently on the forehead, "Luna, I got to meet my mum and dad, I know exactly what this means to you. "Harry was thoughtful for a moment before continuing. "I think I might soon be the one getting labelled with the 'loony' tag when people discover I really am leaving magic behind. Please don't waste your time or energy trying to defend me. One thing magical Britain has taught me is that witches and wizards will believe whatever they want, regardless of what we say. I just hope that when that time comes, I don't need to be defended from anyone named Weasley. There's no way Ron will understand my decision, I can only hope he'll accept it."

"I think you may be right Harry, he does usually come around in the end. It might take Ginny and the twins hexing him for days but I'm sure he'll get there eventually."

Harry took out a small box and handed it to Luna. "This is a little present to remind you of our friendship."

Luna opened the box and stared at the gold chain and charm inside.

"It's a St Christopher Luna, the patron saint of travellers. It's to bring you luck and keep you safe." Harry didn't tell her there was enough magic infused into the necklace to offer protection from just about anything short of an unforgivable. He watched her place it around her neck and instantly felt better. Luna was now a target purely because she was a friend of his, at least he'd done something to protect her.

"Thank you Harry, it's beautiful and I'll never take it off. Can I offer you something in return?"

"Luna, there's no need..."

"It's just some advice Harry. Everyone around you and Hermione can see the situation for what it is but she's over-thinking it. Hermione needs to hear the words Harry, only then will she start to believe it's true."

This rocked Harry back on his heels for a moment before replying. "Thanks Luna, I thought I'd made my feelings quite clear in the limited time we had, I can see now that you're right. Hermione will be over-analysing everything, probably thinks she's not good



enough for the 'chosen one'. She'd never believe quite the opposite is true. I didn't want to do this by letter but it's the only option I've got right now. When I see her next, I don't want it to be just for a stolen hour and then have to leave. I really miss her so much. Hermione will have far too many questions for that to work anyway."

"I'll take the knight bus over tomorrow and visit with her. I think I would be taking my life in my hands though if I told her I spent the afternoon with your arm around me."

This got Harry chucking, he never moved his arm though. He and Luna sat there and chatted for a while. It occurred to Harry that he was probably the first person in the world that Luna had told her hopes and dreams to. This made him feel very special. He felt as if he was witnessing his friend crawl from her cocoon and spread her wings as a beautiful butterfly was born. There is no way Harry would be giving up his friendship with Luna Lovegood.

-oOoOo-

The mood inside Hogwarts couldn't stay sombre for long. Harry Potter may be leaving but it was still the last week of term, exams were over and the summer holidays beckoned. The sudden hysterical laughter emanating from, of all places, the Ravenclaw table was still strange enough to stop conversation and have everyone looking around for the source.

From his raised position at the staff table, Severus Snape had already spotted the culprit. "Miss Chang, braying like a constipated donkey is not behaviour becoming of a young witch. Certainly not one who is a Hogwarts prefect! Clearly your association with Potter has had a detrimental effect on you."

As Severus expected, this silenced the hall. That was until the girl looked directly at him. If anything, her laughter intensified as she handed the letter she was reading to her friends. Soon they were in the same condition as Miss Chang. Severus turned to their head of house. "Professor Flitwick, Since I can no longer assign detentions to your house, and you undermined my authority the last time I removed points from the girl, can I assume you will deal with this matter?"

Filius made his way toward the Ravenclaw table, having no trouble following the progress of the offending letter. Those who had read it were all laughing like hyenas breathing nothing but nitrous oxide, the anticipation of those next in line was also unmistakable. Filius removed the note from a now hysterical Padma Patil.

The first thing that surprised him was that the note was from Miss Lovegood to Miss Chang. She was accepting the offer of friendship but was also offering some news she'd gotten from her recent meeting with Harry Potter. It was easy to see what part of the note had caused the commotion, Filius had to read it three times to confirm what his eyes were actually seeing.

It took every ounce of his self-control not to just collapse into laughter there and then, this was too good to be wasted like that. Filius never saw Padma heading toward the Gryffindor table to inform her sister of what the note said, he never even noticed he'd handed the note to Miss Bones of Hufflepuff by mistake. He was too busy wondering how to use this, oh Minerva would so be getting an owl from him today.

Word of mouth was faster than reading a letter, as such the news was spreading through the hall like a brush fire.

Filius sat down at the staff table and began to eat his breakfast slowly, he didn't want to choke when the laughter became impossible to hold back.

Severus could wait no longer as half the hall was now in stitches of laughter. "Well?"

"Oh sorry Severus, was there something you wanted?"

"I would like to know why this school is descending into chaos and you did nothing about it?"

"Oh that! It was just a note from Miss Lovegood to Miss Chang. She mentioned spending yesterday afternoon with Mr Potter."

This had everyone at the staff table hanging on his every word, time for Filius to deliver the blow. "Mr Potter just happened to tell her the reason you were so pissed off the other night, or should that be pissed on? Gives new meaning to the old axiom 'it's a wise man who

doesn't eat yellow snow'. Give it a day or so and I'll bet there's a new one about golden memories. It would appear your rather jaundiced view of Mr Potter was returned to you tenfold."

Poppy had to explain what had happened to Hagrid and the gentle giant then gave new meaning to the phrase 'word of mouth'. The entire hall heard him.

"Peed in his pensieve? No wonder Snape washed his hair!"

The only people in the hall who were not laughing at Dumbledore and Snape were those who didn't know what a pensieve was, they would soon have this explained to them.

Snape stormed out the hall, even those blasted Weasley twins hadn't managed to turn him into a laughing stock.

Albus though was deep in thought, he'd have to increase the watchers around Weasley and Granger. Harry must be found, and soon.

-oOoOo-

Neville was working happily in his greenhouse when the voice saying his name startled him into action. He swung around and went into a crouch, his wand already in his hand, before recognition of the voice caught up with him.

"Wow Nev, new wand and a quick-release wrist holder? I'm guessing your gran liked the peace offering." Harry appeared from under his cloak.

"Harry! You just about scared the shit out of me." His new wand disappeared back up his sleeve as he then grabbed his friend in a one-armed hug. "Gran not only forgave me, she's taking the golden wand with her to St Mungo's so my mum and dad can see it." Neville tried to hide his embarrassment. "Gran refuses to give up on them, no matter what the healers' say."

This was the opening Harry was looking for, and he didn't even have to engineer it. "Neville, as you know, I can now heal people. I would like to try with your mum and dad but would hate to get your gran's hopes up in case it doesn't work."

Neville just stood there speechless, Harry understood exactly what he was offering his friend. The chance to actually talk to his parents was a treasure beyond measure. He casually waved his hand over Neville to transfigure his gardening clothes into something more appropriate for visiting a hospital. Harry then started to put his father's cloak back on.

"It's probably better if no one sees me."

This snapped Neville out of his stupor as the situation crashed home. He indicated his transfigured robes. "Harry, should I be insulted these don't say Potter on the back?"

This earned a chuckle from Harry before he was serious once more. "Nev, I can't make any promises here, other than to do my best."

"I can't ask for any more than that Harry. I would like to ask if this healing talent has anything to do with that arch thing in the ministry that killed your godfather?"

Harry was now worried, if Neville could figure this out then Dumbledore surly would. "Why do you ask Nev?"

"I'm pretty sure only Professor Lupin and me saw you run through that thing after your godfather. By the time he screamed 'stop' and everyone had turned around, you were racing after Lestrage. The look of terror on his face as you went through that arch told me that was not a good thing to do, he obviously didn't expect you to come out the other side. He also doesn't know you like the rest of us, Harry Potter doing the impossible is becoming commonplace." Neville could tell this was something his friend wasn't comfortable with, nor did he want anyone else to know. "Don't worry Harry, I won't say a word"

"Thanks Nev, Luna knows some of it and I plan on telling Hermione everything. I just don't know how our favourite redheads are going to take me leaving. Don't worry, I have no intentions of leaving my friends."

"Harry, I think I've proven that I'll follow you anywhere. If you can pull off another miracle today, I'll even put Potter on my back!"

Harry could only smile at his friend, "If Hermione gives me a knock-back I'll keep that in mind. I have to say though, Luna is ahead of you in the queue."

Neville theatrically wiped his brow in simulated relief, "Phew, no worries then!"

"There is one favour you could do for me though..."

Neville was always going to say yes. After hearing what Harry wanted, he couldn't wait.

Harry covered himself with his cloak and it was mere seconds later that Neville also disappeared from sight.

-oOoOo-

"Hermione! There's someone here to see you."

Her dad's shout had Hermione crashing down the stairs in record time, only to discover it wasn't Harry.

Luna couldn't miss the disappointment written all over her friend's face, it was time for Hermione to realise she was dealing with a different Luna now. The little blond marched straight up to her, took the brunette's head in her hands and kissed Hermione full on the lips. Hermione was totally shocked and ready to scream at Luna until her blond friend spoke. "That's from Harry!"

The change in Hermione was instantaneous. As far as she was concerned, Luna had just uttered the magic word. "Harry? You've seen him? Tell me when, tell me everything, now!"

Dan just stood there, he might be forgotten but he was every bit as shocked as his daughter at Luna's actions. The name Harry though had an entirely different effect on him. "Harry? Yes please tell us Luna how this boy can find time to visit you, yet my daughter is left moping about the house. Left with nothing more than a short note and a bloody flower."

"Oh, did you get flowers too Hermione? He sent some to Parvati and Cho, to apologise for being such a lousy date. Did you know when

you asked Harry to meet us that Valentine's Day, he was actually on a date with Cho?"

Hermione's blushes were saved by her father's temper. "Parvati? Cho? Just how many girls is this Harry fellow stringing along? I suppose he brought you flowers too?"

"Oh no Mr Granger..."

"Well at least that's something!"

Luna continued with what she'd been saying before Dan interrupted. "Harry gave me this beautiful necklace. He also took flowers to Professor McGonagall in hospital, I don't think that counts though since he never took her on a date."

Hermione had caught the glint in Luna's eye. "Luna, please don't tease my father any more. He doesn't know you like I do." This was said more for her father's benefit as Hermione was quickly coming to realise she didn't know Luna Lovegood at all.

Her mother arrived to see what all the commotion was about, distracting her father long enough for Hermione to grab hold of Luna and drag her up the stairs to her room. When she had the door safely shut behind them, Hermione wanted answers.

"Luna, what the hell was that all about? Please don't play coy with me, you knew exactly what you were doing down there. I'm already getting more than enough grief without you adding to it. The house is being watched and dad wants to drag me off to France next week on holiday. I don't want to go in case I miss Harry and my dad is not happy at that."

"Is that what the problem is? I could feel the tension the second I entered your house. Don't worry Hermione, Harry will find you wherever you are, even if that's France."

Hermione sat on the bed beside Luna. "How come he could speak to you Luna and not me? And what the hell was that kissing business downstairs? In front of my father too!"

"Harry told me only what I needed to know. He intends to tell only one person everything and she's sitting right beside me. About the

kissing thing? I kinda took advantage of Harry and was feeling really guilty about it. When I saw how disappointed you were that I wasn't Harry, passing the kiss on just seemed like the right thing to do."

"I'm sorry Luna, I really am pleased to see you but I'm desperate to see Harry. Do I want to know why you were kissing him?"

Luna pretended not to hear that last bit. "He asked me to tell you that he's fine and not to worry about him. He really looked better than fine to me, and promised to get in touch the moment he can tell you the full story. I got the impression that he has quite a lot going on at the moment though he appeared to have things under control."

"Harry's always saying he's fine, that doesn't mean that he is. Sirius being killed must have really affected him."

Luna had to smile at how well these two knew each other. "Hermione, Harry told me that our loved ones never really leave us. He really was fine and appeared more worried about you, I was asked to come over and convince you that he actually is ok." She tried to lighten the mood. "Harry also understands what not knowing everything must be doing to you."

It was now Hermione's turn to ignore the last remark. "I'll believe Harry's fine only when I see it for myself. Tell me everything he said Luna, word for word."

Luna figured the stuff about her mother was private but had no problems telling Hermione everything else. She half expected her friend to grab some parchment and start taking notes.

When Emma appeared an hour later, using tea and biscuits as her passport for entry into Hermione's room, Luna found herself telling the story all over again. This was her second afternoon spent chatting to friends and she was really beginning to enjoy it.

-oOoOo-

Augusta Longbottom was a witch on a mission, this was what happened when she cut her grandson some slack. He goes missing and then she gets an urgent summons to St Mungo's. Augusta was so busy fretting about Neville, she didn't realise her feet had taken

her along the often trodden route to the room that held her son and daughter-in-law. She was surprised to see her grandson standing outside their door. He'd clearly been crying but wore a smile that illuminated the entire corridor. She intended to get to the bottom of this immediately.

"Neville!"

She never got to say anymore as he ran toward Augusta and swept her up in a bear hug. The prim and prudish grandmother found herself up in the air and being twirled around by her still crying grandson. Augusta had to use both hands to ensure she didn't lose her hat. "Neville, put me down this instant! What's the matter with you?"

Neville carefully put her down but that beaming smile was still there. "Nothing's the matter gran, everything in the world is just bloody wonderful!"

Augusta was beginning to think this was a delayed reaction to Neville fighting death eaters at the ministry, she'd always known he was too delicate and sensitive for that kind of thing. She allowed him to lead her into the unusually busy room, just about every healer in the hospital appeared to be there.

The Longbottom matriarch was about to start demanding answers when a voice Augusta never thought she would ever hear again spoke to her. It was only two words and it was very faint but Augusta Longbottom thought it was easily the sweetest sound she'd ever heard.

"Hello mum!"

-oOoOo-

Dinner that evening in the Granger household was once more strained. Luna had returned home and now her dad was looking for answers, Hermione didn't have any answers to give him. The fruit salad was interrupted by a large bouquet of red and white roses arriving beside Hermione, there was also another note.

Dan was determined not to be impressed. "Flowers again? Perhaps he has shares in a florist's, he appears to hand them out willy-nilly."



Hermione was not going to sit there and let her father away with that. "Perhaps it's because Harry knows both my parents are dentists and would frown on him sending me chocolates. He doesn't know that my father actually frowns on everything. Anyway, they're for me and I happen to think they're beautiful!"

Dan reacted as if he'd been hit, that might have had something to do with Emma kicking him under the table.

Emma was now staring at him with an expression that clearly said 'shut it' before she spoke to their daughter. "Hermione, you may have heard the expression 'say it with flowers'. Harry is certainly sending his message across loud and clear. Since your father never buys me roses, he wouldn't know this. A single red rose means 'I love you!' That could have been a coincidence but there can be no mistake now. A mixture of red and white roses given together signifies just that, togetherness and unity. Even if he doesn't ask you to be his girlfriend in that note, the flowers are doing that for him."

"You're reading an awful lot into some flowers – ouch!" Dan was now rubbing his ankle.

"I never said anything because it could just have been a red rose. Red and white together tells me everything I need to know. A bouquet like that would have to be specially put together and any florist would know exactly what it meant. They would also make sure the customer sending them knew exactly what it meant too."

Dan was feeling sore, and not just from being kicked in the ankle. It was an unusual feeling for him to be the bad guy in the house and he didn't like it. "When we started going out, you said you hated flowers. You spent every weekend and holiday working in a florist to put yourself through university."

"Dan, that was nearly twenty years ago. Did it escape your attention I have a garden full of flowers and pick bunches for the house all summer?"

This was giving Hermione time to read her note, she was praying her mum was right. She was disappointed though, the note appeared to be some ramblings about things she already knew or

that Luna had told her. She took some consolation that he'd signed it 'Love Harry' but she was no further forward.

As she was sitting it down to inspect her flowers, some irregularities caught her eye. One of the sentences that had made no sense to Hermione appeared to have certain words highlighted. It was very subtle and it only appeared when she glanced at it from a certain angle. The twins were looking for some wartmap powder and he'd remembered passing some last summer in Sirius's house, could she get the word to the right people.

She had originally wondered what the hell he was talking about and assumed he'd spelt wartcap wrong, now it made perfect sense.

TWINS - MAP - PASS – WORD.

Mentioning Sirius in the same sentence sealed the deal for Hermione, there was a hidden message here that Harry didn't want anyone else to read. That, combined with her mother's interpretation of the flowers had her head spinning.

"What does it say darling?"

"Yes, are we going on holiday next week or not?" Dan had wisely moved his leg out of Emma's range, he got the distinct impression that he would be paying for it later though.

Hermione was desperate to get away and read the real note, she had also been told by Luna, and Harry, that he would find her anywhere. Time to cut her father a bit of slack. "Oh he says he's fine and will be in touch soon, France next week sounds lovely dad. Mum, can I get a vase to put these in my room."

Hermione made her way up to her room, carefully laying her flowers on her dresser before touching the note with her wand. "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."

All the letters in the note rearranged themselves into a totally different message.

My dearest Hermione

I knew you would figure it out. Even with this security though, I still can't tell you what happened or what I'm doing now. That's a conversation that must be face to face. I had also intended to do this next bit face to face too but now realise it's wrong to leave you hanging like this. Hermione, when you got injured in the ministry, my heart stopped. Imagining, even for a few seconds, what my life would be like without you in it terrified me. It forced me to confront the depth of my feelings for you, I'm just sorry you had to get seriously injured for me to see that, thick or what?

I now realise I have feelings for you that go way beyond those of a best friend. The next step is to ask if you will please be my girlfriend, that's where the flowers come into play. If your answer is yes, place them in your bedroom window and you'll make me the happiest boy in the country. If your answer is no then please enjoy the flowers and I hope we can always remain best friends.

I realise I'm just adding to the conversation we will be having when my tasks are complete, I promise to tell you everything no matter what your answer is. I also promise to ask you again in person once you know the full story and what my hopes and plans are.

All my love Hermione and I'll be hoping to see flowers in your window soon.

Harry.

Hermione jumping up and down on her bed while shouting yes, yes, yes was the sight that greeted Emma as she entered the bedroom with a vase in her hand. "Can I assume there was more to that letter than you originally thought?"

Hermione grabbed the vase out her mother's hand, replacing it with the modified note. "Harry had a private code hidden in the note, I used it and got the real message. I'm just about to answer him."

Emma read the note and smiled as her daughter lovingly arranged her roses on her windowsill. Their little girl was all grown up but, more importantly, was clearly very, very happy.

-oOoOo-

There was a distinct lack of happiness at Hogwarts as Albus once more found his potions professor in the infirmary, Severus looked terrible. The children might have left yesterday but it was beginning to look as if they were in for a very long, hard summer.

"How are you Severus?"

"Alive, for now! There were three death eaters there last night who were not so fortunate. Whatever Potter did to the dark lord is resisting any and all attempts to heal it. That the Prophet had Potter healing the Longbottoms on its front page sent the dark lord into a fury like none of us had ever seen before, and hope never to see again."

Poppy had to help him drink the post cruciatus potion as his hands wouldn't stop shaking long enough for Severus to do it himself. "Every time something appears to be working, the results prove to be only temporary. That lightning bolt scar bursts open and begins bleeding all over again. The dark lord has destroyed more of his followers in the last few days than the entire auror corps managed in the last war."

Albus was totally helpless as his friend suffered, he'd been unable to find any mention of this curse in any of his many books. "Is this wound life-threatening Severus?"

"Yes, to everyone but the dark lord. He won't die from it but a lot of his followers might. If we don't find Potter soon, I might have to declare myself for the light. It really isn't safe to be anywhere near the dark lord at the moment. I have no intention of losing my life because Potter got a lucky hit in with an unknown curse. Add to that, the death eaters with children at Hogwarts now know about the pensieve incident and what that filthy brat did to us. We have to find him, even if it's just so I can kill him myself."

Albus had the kindly grandfather persona performing at full power. "Severus, you know you don't mean that. I'm having the Weasley and Granger properties watched. Sooner or later he's bound to turn up at one of them, then we'll get some answers."

Albus was imagining Harry back under his control and Severus even closer to Tom after he healed the wound.

"It has to be soon Albus, continued exposure to the cruciatus curse and being a potions master are activities that do not go together."

"Oh, it will be Severus, Harry will be back amongst us soon. It's his destiny and even Mr Potter can't escape destiny!"

A/N Thanks for reading.

As promised, the workaround Aealket sent me.

For those of you who aren't aware, there's a site error on FF at the moment that's preventing people from updating stories in categories with over 40,000 or so stories (e.g. Harry Potter, Naruto, etc).

So if you haven't been getting many alerts for the past week, that's why! For you authors: this error can be bypassed by changing "property" to "content" in your address bar when you get the error.

## Chapter 5

Ginny faked throwing right before changing direction and hurling the quaffle left, Ron had bought the dummy but recovered enough to almost save it. In Quidditch though, almost doesn't quite cut it. The quaffle grazed his grasping fingertips before passing through their improvised hoop. Ginny punched the air in celebration of her score before the sound of someone applauding had her spinning around. A full speed dash toward their previously unseen spectator followed a cry of 'Harry'. Ginny's enthusiasm saw her hit Harry so hard and fast that both ended up on the grass, rolling in a tangle of limbs and laughter.

Ron's voice cut through the laughter at their predicament. His tone wasn't completely in jest as he chided his best friend. "Hey Potter, keep those hands where I can see them."

This of course drew a retort from his sister. "Harry can put his hands wherever the hell he wants too! He's just far too much of a gentleman to take advantage of that fact, not like somebody I could mention."

Harry was still laughing, his mood buoyed by being at his favourite place. He was helping the little redhead to her feet. "I'll bite Ginny, tell the story. We all know you're dying to."

"Oh we were in Diagon Alley and getting some funny stares since our names were in the Prophet. We bumped into Lavender and she was all over Ron like a bad smell. Hero of the Ministry she called him before kissing the prat in thanks. Poor Pig is now knackered carrying letters between them at least twice every day."

Ron's face was bright red as he went all defensive. "Well, it's not like I had anyone else to talk to, my best friend buggered off and left us in the middle of a fight."

Ginny was now right in her brother's face, well as close as their height discrepancy allowed. "That's a load of tosh and you know it Ron. Harry would die before he would leave anyone behind in a fight, I should know. How can you possibly say that? Lavender's snogging must have sucked out what little brains you had."

Harry playfully hit his friend on the back. "Snogging Lavender? Way to go Ron, never figured you for being so quick off the mark."

"Oh he's not! It was all Lavender, Ron Ron was just along for the ride." It wasn't until after she'd said it, Ginny realised what a double entendre that was.

Harry raised a quizzical eyebrow as two Weasleys held a blushing contest before he cracked and just had to laugh. "Oh, you should see your faces."

This started Ginny giggling before Ron saw the funny side of the situation and laughed along with them. Soon they were all sitting on the grass, once more comfortable in each other's company. Ron got the ball rolling.

"Where have you been Harry, why did it take you so long to contact us? I thought we would have been first on your list, not last."

"You're not last Ron, I've still to see Hermione. Everyone else also thought the same as you, that's why I had to knock-out two members of the order just to get a chance to talk with you."

Both Weasleys were instantly on their feet, outraged that they were being spied on, by their own side too! Harry led them over and they could see a pair of woman's feet sticking out from seemingly nothing. "Invisibility cloak, the other one was guarding the house in case I went there first. We only have a short time before they start to wake, I may need to leave immediately if their relief shows up."

Ron was heading for the house to see the other one before Harry stopped him. "I can't risk your mum or dad seeing me, I really don't want to deal with Dumbledore today."

The trio made their way back to where they had been sitting as Ron spoke. "Lavender told us what you did to Snape, that was just wicked. The twins laughed so hard, they couldn't get up off the floor. Considering that the greasy git already hated your guts, does this mean that you won't be going back to Hogwarts?"

This was the bit Harry wasn't looking forward too, with Ron, you just never knew how he was going to take things. "Ron, I'm transferring back into the muggle education system. I've spent the last five years

trying to fit into the magical world and it's just not working. I'm either the saviour or some attention seeking nutcase, we both know I'm neither. I just want to be Harry but can't, and never will be, accepted as that."

Ron's temper began to surface. "Are you saying this was all a mistake? You're just going to walk away and forget about magic, forget about us? Why would anyone in their right mind want to give up magic?"

"I can't think of the last five years as a mistake. That's purely because I've made some great friends, friends I couldn't forget about and certainly don't want to."

"How's that going to work Harry? You'll be in one world and we'll be in another."

"Ron, it's the same bloody world! There are muggles living in Ottery St Catchpole alongside the Lovegoods and Weasleys."

"Yes, but we don't have anything to do with them."

"That's your choice Ron, I intend to keep in touch with my friends. Muggles account for over ninety nine percent of the population, all managing fine without magic. If you chose to turn your back on that, then it's your loss."

"What about Voldemort Harry, are you just going to walk away from him too?"

"Ron, I'll be sixteen in a couple of weeks. Why the hell should I be expected to deal with that psycho mass murderer?"

"He killed your parents!"

"Thanks for reminding me Ron, I'd actually forgotten that little detail! If my parents couldn't beat him, how the fuck am I supposed to do it? There is a ministry of magic whose responsibility it is to protect you, let them get up off their arse and deal with the situation. Dumbledore can get himself another Order of Merlin, shit they would probably rename it the Order of Dumbledore if he rid them of Voldemort too. I told the snake-faced bastard to leave my friends alone, if he doesn't then I'll go looking for him."



Ron couldn't miss that Harry was beginning to lose his temper, he wasn't one for backing down either. "But you're Harry Potter, the boy who lived. You can't just walk away and leave us. What about the prophecy?"

Harry was exasperated. "Trelawney made the prophecy Ron, she couldn't make a cup of tea! Look, I didn't come here to argue, I'd hoped to spend some time with my friends. I brought presents for both of you." Harry summoned the gifts from where he'd hidden them, two Firebolts flew into his hands. "The Gryffindor team will be unstoppable with two Weasleys flying on these."

Ginny's eyes nearly popped out her head at the gift Harry was giving her. She'd held her tongue during the argument, knowing this was something they both needed to deal with. She was in the position of being able to see both sides, having been on the receiving end of a tiny bit of the attention Harry got. Ginny didn't like the public attention at all. Her hands were trembling as she accepted what was still considered to be the best broom in the world, she at least managed to say thanks before grabbing him for a kiss.

It was only then Ginny noticed that Harry still had a broom in his hand. That Ron hadn't immediately stepped forward to take his gift alerted Ginny that this could be really bad. For her Quidditch obsessed brother not to snatch the offer of a free Firebolt could only mean one thing, an explosion was imminent. When it came, it was more deserving of being called a damp squib. It still contained the power to hurt all three of them though.

"I don't want a Firebolt Harry, I want my friend back. A broom is a poor substitute."

Ron was a picture of utter dejection as he slowly walked back to the house, leaving two very shocked and stunned people behind.

"Well, that could have gone better?"

"Oh Harry, we're all going to miss you, I think it's finally hitting Ron just how much. I can't think of anyone else he wouldn't gladly swap for a new Firebolt. That he rates your friendship higher than his dream broom is a massive compliment. He'll come around

eventually, there were no punches or curses flying about so that actually went quite well."

Harry handed Ginny the other broom before leaning in and kissing her goodbye. "You're a great friend and sister Ginny, you can be sure I'll keep in touch somehow. Please don't hex him, Ron's hurting every bit as badly as we are, he just deals with it differently. Apologise to your mum and dad for me please, I don't have time to visit with Dumbledore chasing me."

Now that Harry was actually leaving, Ginny had tears in her eyes. "You've been a good friend to the Weasleys Harry, please don't forget about us!"

Harry gave her a wide grin. "Never going to happen Ginny, I fully intend to see my children visiting the Burrow to play with all their little Weasley cousins."

Ginny dropped both brooms and wrapped her arms around Harry, he'd just described her dream. Of course, in her dream, all the Potter children had red hair.

-oOoOo-

Albus Dumbledore was not receiving his usual warm welcome at the Burrow, this particular one was considerably warmer. Arthur Weasley was in a red hot rage.

"Would you care to explain why two members of the order were sneaking about the Burrow under invisibility cloaks? They certainly didn't have our permission to spy on the Weasley family."

Albus was unrepentant. "Harry must be found, I knew sooner or later he would come here."

It was a tearful Molly who appeared ready to remodel Dumbledore's new look by pulling his shortened whiskers out by the roots. "And now that poor boy thinks we participated in this trap, I never even got a chance to say goodbye!" The tears started flowing again as Arthur took over.

"You had no right to do this Albus. This is my home and my family, neither is yours to use as you please."

Albus brushed this argument off as inconsequential. "Nevertheless, I must speak with Ronald and Ginevra. It is imperative that I discover what Harry is up to before Voldemort can, Harry's safety should be our only concern here."

Albus thought that would have settled the matter but Ron's mood hadn't improved any from earlier.

"So you're not here because both Luna and Neville sent you away with a flea in your ear? What Harry said between us stays between us, we're telling you nothing because it's none of your business. Your constant poking of your nose into his life is probably the reason he's leaving, to get a bit of freedom and peace."

"That's a very unhelpful attitude Ronald, especially for a Hogwarts prefect."

Ron got up and stormed out the room, Albus turned his attention to Ginny.

"Don't even think about it! Sirius is dead because of the secrets you kept from Harry, now you expect us to tell you his? Not going to happen."

Albus was robbed of the right to a reply by Ron coming back into the room. He slapped a piece of metal into the headmaster's hand.

"Please inform Professor McGonagall that I can no longer be a Gryffindor prefect. Being expected to tell tales on your friends is far too high a price to pay for the privilege."

Dumbledore was unused to people telling him no, especially mere students. "And shall I tell her you are also resigning from the Gryffindor Quidditch team?"

Ron glanced at Ginny and got an instant nod of agreement from his sister. "I recently found out there are things a lot more important than Quidditch. Please inform Professor McGonagall we both resign."

Arthur had quite enough of this, his wife in tears and his children being bullied, not if he had anything to say about it. "If I discover my

children are being disadvantaged in any way at Hogwarts, you have my assurance I shall be taking the matter to the school board. This is their summer holidays and discussions with their friend falls under the 'none of your business' category. Kindly leave, and take any hidden members of the order with you. Should I discover any more watchers, I shall consider them hostile and cast first, asking any questions later."

Albus flooded back to his office, once more returning without any useful information on Harry. Ronald had been quite correct in his assumption that he had indeed got nothing from their other two friends Harry had visited. Miss Lovegood simply said no and point-blank refused to answer any of his questions. Mr Longbottom was, if anything, worse. He refused even to be in the same room as his headmaster. With Frank and Alice now back in the land of the living, not one word would be tolerated against the name Potter at Longbottom Manor. Augusta didn't quite toss Albus out on his ear, it was close though.

Albus was at a loss, couldn't these people see that Harry needed to be brought back under his control? Harry had to confront Voldemort, there was no other option. With the Weasleys no longer cooperating, his only chance now was the Grangers. Unfortunately, they were muggles and currently on holiday in France. This seriously compromised the order's ability to keep watch, there would be hell to play with the French Ministry if they were exposed like Harry had managed to do at the Burrow. That it was in a muggle area too compounded the problem. Albus felt he could explain away one person as a guard for Harry Potter's best friend, any more would see questions asked he really didn't want to answer.

After experiencing the reactions of the Lovegood girl, the Longbottoms and the Weasleys, he wasn't hopeful of any answers being forthcoming from the remaining member of their group. Albus knew Voldemort would retire from the terror business and become a hair stylist before Miss Granger would willingly betray Harry Potter.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was lying reading on a sun lounger, tanning beside the pool of their lovely rented villa. She was actually enjoying her holiday, helped greatly by the note and flowers that arrived her first night here. Not only did the flowers indicate Harry knew exactly

where she was, the note said he had almost completed his tasks and hoped to see her soon. That the flowers had appeared in her bedroom upset her father greatly but Hermione wasn't caring, she was going to see Harry shortly and couldn't wait to greet her boyfriend the way she'd dreamed of.

She was so engrossed in her book, Hermione didn't notice the beautiful horned owl that had landed on the table. The bark-like sound it emitted got her attention and Hermione could have sworn the bird was laughing at her, it held its leg out to have the message removed.

"Hello handsome, what have you got for me?"

Emma was lying in the shade but had noticed the bird flying silently onto the table. "Is that from Luna dear, she said she would write."

The excitement in Hermione's voice was unmistakable. "No mum, it's from Harry! I'd know his chicken scratch anywhere."

Before Hermione could even open it, there was a rustle of an invisibility cloak being removed and a witch she didn't know snatched it out her hand. She heard the witch say 'about bloody time' as Hermione sprang for her wand, unfortunately the witch had apparated away before the young brunette could get a spell off. Hermione went from elation to being devastated in an instant. She sank to her knees, screaming 'Bastard!' at the spot where the witch had been a second ago.

Emma was heading at pace to comfort her daughter when witnessing the impossible stopped the concerned mother in her tracks. The beautiful owl fluttered off the table and transformed into a handsome young man right before her eyes. He was dressed smart, but casual in a pair of khaki shorts and a dark green polo shirt while smiling down at the kneeling Hermione.

"I'm gone for a few weeks and you start using language like that?"

The young man was behind Hermione but she apparently didn't need to turn around to know who he was. Emma wondered if Hermione had undergone some form of transformation herself, it was certainly magical the way she went from on her knees in utter despair to wrapped around this young man in a split-second. Her

daughter's cry of 'Harry' told Emma who this was, she didn't recognise the boy from their previous meetings. There was a whole different air of confidence about this young man, the new glasses and smart clothes helped too. He was apparently quite the catch and Emma couldn't help but think Hermione wasn't for letting him go anytime soon.

Dan had been inside when he heard his daughter's anguished cry, he raced to get to Hermione's aid only to experience being stopped in his tracks by the sight he was faced with. Unlike Emma though, this was not a pleasant experience for Dan Granger. His wife and daughter had been lying in bikinis, enjoying the sunshine. Hermione now had her legs and arms around this boy while attempting to suck his face off as her mother stood and did nothing about it. This was just too much for the father as he shouted at them. "What the fuck is going on here?"

Harry was also very conscious of all the bare flesh wrapped around him, he was holding Hermione just as tightly and matching her enthusiasm in their kiss. That his hand was on her bum was purely to stop her falling.

When her father shouted, Hermione reluctantly stopped the kiss she'd been dreaming about for years. She stayed exactly where she was though, Harry was never getting away from her again. Hermione didn't even look around but introduced her boyfriend while staring into his eyes from a distance of about four inches. "Mum, dad, this is my Harry."

Harry had no intention of looking around either, the view he currently had was one he would never tire of. "Hi Mr and Mrs Granger. Hermione, we need to get the hell out of here now."

Dan had quite enough of this young punk. "Listen to me son, I really don't give a shit who you are. You are not leaving here with my daughter."

Harry lowered Hermione gently to her feet but both kept an arm tightly around each other before turning to face her parents. Harry had to straighten his new glasses before he spoke. "Mr Granger, I fooled the guard into revealing herself and leaving. They'll be back soon, probably with reinforcements. They will then attempt to take me by force, I have no intention of going quietly!"

Hermione was standing at his side, one arm wrapped around Harry with her wand clutched in her other hand. No further words were needed for the Granger parents. If they came for Harry, Hermione would fight at his side while they would then be relegated to the roles of mere bystanders, if not liabilities.

Emma tried to fill her husband in on the action he'd missed. "Dan, a woman appeared out of nowhere, stole Hermione's letter before disappearing with it. Then the owl turned into Harry and you just about saw the rest."

Harry didn't have to look to know Hermione was staring at him questioningly. "Put it on the list for later Hermione, we don't have time now."

Dan Granger considered himself good under pressure, problem solving was something he excelled at. "Ok, you two obviously need to leave, but we're coming with you!"

Harry broke into a grin, "Fine with me sir, but it has to be now. We're talking being minutes away from having to fight a battle."

Both Granger ladies had wraps sitting beside their loungers that they grabbed, Dan was in similar attire to Harry. It was Dan who asked the practical question. "How are we getting to wherever it is we're going?"

Harry's answer had them thinking until he explained his reasoning. "By car. If you're gone and it's still parked outside, that will let them know I'm involved. If the car's gone too, they won't be sure. It always pays to keep your enemy guessing."

They were all piling into the hire car before Emma asked a question. "I thought we were safe Harry but you just called them the enemy?"

"They're Dumbledore's people and certainly my enemies. They want to capture me, drag me back to Britain and force me to be a good little puppet and do what I'm supposed to do."

Dan was having trouble listening to this. "And you know better than everyone else about this?"

"As unusual as that sounds, in this case I do sir. I know things that they don't, it's this and not arrogance that makes me say I know better. Dumbledore is in possession of some information that he's determined means I must act a certain way. Please excuse my language but fuck that!"

Emma was trying to play peacemaker here as they headed to this new location, Hermione was too busy holding on to Harry as if to reassure herself her young man was real. "What does Dumbledore want you to do that's so bad Harry?"

Harry paused for a second before answering. "He expects me to take one for the team and die!"

Hermione's scream almost caused Dan to crash the car. Harry was attempting to soothe her nerves while passing Dan directions to their destination. It wasn't long before they pulled into another villa that was further up the hill, and quite a bit more expensive than the one the Grangers had been staying in. Harry asked Dan to park in the garage, explaining he didn't want the car to be recognised. The four entered the house where Hermione was greeted by an excited Winky and Dobby.

Harry greeted his little friends. "Hi guys, can we have lunch for four out by the pool? I think it'll be four for dinner as well, give Dobby a chance to show off his barbequing skills."

Two very happy elves popped away as Harry led his guests out to the pool area. They had travelled up the hill by twisty roads but all three Grangers could see their villa down the hill, about half a mile away.

When Dan spied the telescope, mounted on a tripod and pointing toward their villa, he lost it. "Why you dirty little shit! You've been spying on us?"

He raised his hands and lunged toward Harry, only to find this time he was physically unable to move.

Hermione and Emma were both about to intervene but now just turned to stare at Harry.



He sighed before calling for Dobby, Harry got down on one knee to speak with his little friend better. "Dobby, why did you do that to Mr Granger?"

"He was going to attack Harry Potter sir."

Harry shook his head. "No Dobby, he's Hermione's father. He would only hit me if I harmed his daughter."

Dobby was outraged. "Harry Potter sir would never harm his Grangy!"

Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath while slowly and silently counting to five. Sometimes this was the only way to deal with Dobby's enthusiasm. He also had to be very careful as Dobby took everything so literal. "Yes Dobby, and that's the misunderstanding. You see, while we know that, Hermione's father doesn't. It's his job to protect his daughter from any harm, that's all he was trying to do. He doesn't know we want the exact same thing and have been guarding Hermione around the clock."

"Dobby is so sorry Harry Potter sir. We wanted to impress our first ever guests and now Dobby has spoiled it. Dobby will go and iron his ears as punishment."

Harry smiled but was also very firm. "You will do no such thing Dobby, that will never be allowed in any house of mine, even one we're only renting. Your punishment will be to cook Mr Granger the best steak he's ever eaten for dinner tonight."

Dobby now had a look of concentration on his little face as he nodded in acceptance, snapping his fingers to release Dan before popping away.

"Sorry about that Mr Granger, they're both very protective of me. They've also spent weeks making sure Hermione here was as safe as she could be. Dobby will now spend hours preparing to serve you the best steak you've ever eaten, please compliment him on it or you'll break his little heart."

Dan could only nod, that little creature had him totally helpless and now Emma had a tight grip on his arm. She led him over to the seating area as Harry explained the situation further.

"Yes I have been keeping a close eye on your family. There has been an invisible watcher there constantly since the moment you set foot on the property, they've also been following you around everywhere you went. At your home in Crawley, there were three of them. I had to wait and make sure it wasn't a trap before making a move. Since I spoke to Ron and Ginny, they knew Hermione would be my next point of contact. I was worried they would get desperate and arrange some kind of kidnapping to draw me out. Dumbledore has no problem with setting someone up as bait, he did it to me with that bloody tournament."

Dan was forced to take the boy's word for it, he had no evidence or experience to disprove what he was saying.

Lunch appeared on the table and looked just the ticket to change the conversation, and hopefully avoid a confrontation. A mixture of cold meats, cheeses, breads, biscuits and side salads covered the rather large table. There was also a large pitcher of some fruity concoction that was delicious. Conversation was light during the meal as they all appreciated Harry's tale would be the main course.

Harry could sense Hermione's mental gears engaging hyper drive and knew it was time. "Where would you like me to start Hermione?"

His girlfriend's smile was predatory. "As long as you tell me everything Harry, I'll let you decide. It's your story after all."

Harry struggled with that answer, where the hell do you begin to tell a story like this? "Well, to give you some idea of how serious the situation is, I'll tell you one of the biggest and darkest secrets of the magical world. Voldemort didn't die the night he cursed me because, in his obsession to be immortal, he created abominations called horcruxes. In simple terms, he detached bits of his soul and hid them inside objects. While one of them survived, Voldemort could not be killed."

Hermione was shocked. "I'm assuming this is not something you simply do after a night down the pub. Have a few pints and then decide to make a horcrux when you're half-drunk?"

"No Hermione, you have to undergo a dark ritual and then murder someone in cold blood. Dumbledore knew this and never intended to tell me."

Watching these two together was enraging Dan, they were practically completing each other's sentences. This boy was a bigger threat than he thought and the father in him was having trouble accepting it. He also saw Harry Potter as someone who was putting his family in danger, Dan wasn't about to let that last comment go unchallenged. "Why should the headmaster be expected to tell a fifteen year old boy something like that?"

"Well Mr Granger, perhaps because the fifteen year old boy had been walking around with a horcrux in his head since he was one year old."

If ever there was a conversation stopper, that was it. Hermione reached over and tenderly caressed his scar. "I thought your scar appeared fainter. To be perfectly honest, I was so glad to see you that I might not have noticed if you were bald! I'm assuming that's why Dumbledore thinks you have to die, Voldemort would live while that piece was in your head? It is gone though?"

Harry leaned over and, with the same amount of tenderness, softly kissed her lips. "Beautiful and brilliant, how could I possibly resist? Yes its gone but I'm getting ahead of myself here, we need to go back to that night in the ministry. When Sirius fell through the veil of death, I ran through it after him."

Hermione could only nod for him to go on, she didn't want to trust whether her voice would work at the moment.

"Luna described it best when she asked me if I'd crossed over. She needed to know some of the details for the information I had to pass to her. I quickly caught up with Sirius and found him talking with two people, those two people were my parents."

Emma was now enthralled, here was a story from someone who'd been to the other side. She noticed Hermione never let go of his hand for a second as Harry told his tale.

Harry's wide smile was not the reaction Hermione expected to this revelation, Harry noticed and read exactly what had confused her. "I

was granted my greatest wish Hermione, I got to spend time with my mum and dad. Because I had a piece of Voldemort's soul in my head, that was considered acceptable payment. That I'd already destroyed another piece a few years ago also helped my case, I was allowed to return with the hope I would finish the job."

Hermione had already worked it out. "The diary that possessed Ginny? Dumbledore knew and still didn't tell you?"

"Nothing new there, what was different though was I had everything I'd dreamed of since a little boy was locked in his cupboard. I was in no hurry at all to leave and then discovered time has no meaning there. I got to stay with my parents and godfather."

Harry's new confidence and skills were beginning to make sense to Hermione now. "How long were you there for Harry?"

"It's impossible to put a figure on Hermione, there was no cycle of days, far less seasons. Best guess would be a good number of years. We were in a room that reminded me of the room of requirements at Hogwarts, it changed to meet whatever our needs were. I got the chance to do everything I missed while growing up, even played Quidditch with my dad and Sirius. My mum proved to be about as good as you on a broom."

Hermione had never seen her boyfriend look so at ease with himself. "Can I assume that there was at least some studying involved?"

Again he gave her the smile that did funny things to her insides.

"Hermione, we didn't need to stop for sleep, or even food. There was years worth of studying done. With that bit of Voldemort out of my head, my power and concentration levels were also greatly increased. Bloody thing was parasitical, feeding off me to survive. Having three very clever people training me certainly helped. Even dead though, Harry Potter had to be different."

This drew a chuckle out of Harry and a surprised glance from Hermione. "Oh, I just heard my mum say that I was always special to her."

That comment worried Emma, talking to the dead was not a good sign even if he'd been 'dead' himself. She had to find out more about this. "Can you really hear your mother's voice Harry?"

His smile never faltered as he answered Emma. "Before crossing over, the only memory I had of my mother was begging Voldemort to spare me and kill her instead. Now I have year upon year of wonderful memories to support me for the rest of my life. Can I ask you something Mrs Granger, did your mother have a favourite saying? Something she would use all the time?"

Emma was instantly transported to another time as she smiled and answered Harry. "She used to always tell me that if you stood for nothing, you would fall for anything."

Harry nodded. "And when you think of that saying, whose voice do you hear it in?"

Her smile was now a wide one of understanding. "My mother's!"

Harry nodded again, "I know for a fact my mum, dad and godfather are watching over me. Occasionally, I know exactly what they'll say about a given situation. I'm trying to cut down speaking to them out loud but it's not something I'm particularly ashamed of."

Hermione squeezed his hand in understanding before asking a question. "Cupboard Harry?"

"Discussion for another time Hermione, that's behind me now and I'm sure you'd much rather hear this next bit. I don't know how it happened but word spread that I would be returning to the living, people started contacting me with offers of help. That curse I hit Voldemort with was created by Godric Gryffindor, I modified it slightly to leave a lightning bolt shaped scar on the forehead."

Hermione was astonished. "You met Godric Gryffindor?"

"Yeah, and he wasn't too pleased at what a certain old wizard is doing to his school. Godric is a great believer in giving people a second chance, but just the one. Godric called it his judgement curse, the magic used to cast it knows exactly why it was cast. If the recipient truly is sorry and changes their ways, the curse will heal and fade over time. If not, it will defy all forms of treatment and never

close. If he came up against someone he'd already marked, that was it for them. When people discover that saying sorry is a universal cure-all, we end up in the state we're in at the moment."

"Surely you don't expect Voldemort to change his ways?"

"Expect? No! I made a promise though to give him a chance, you know I always keep my promises Hermione. Even Helga Hufflepuff couldn't overcome the magic enough to heal someone hit with this, and she was just amazing!"

Harry knew he was jumping from place to place but this story didn't need to be linear. He was also desperate to tell Hermione his most important piece of news. It had sounded fine when he'd spent many hours discussing and refining his plans with his parents and Sirius, this was the acid test though. "Meeting Helga changed my life. She was the one who discovered, minus my lump of Voldemort, I had a natural affinity with healing. This then became her mission and she spent what must have been years teaching me all she could."

Harry turned to face his girlfriend, here was the crucial part. "I now had the sword and a healing staff as my main attributes, it was time to choose a path. What you said to me that last day in Hogwarts had been reverberating through my mind, I was forced to admit you were right. Hermione Granger being right is hardly a shocking revelation, discovering I had a saving people thing though was a shock to me."

Hermione tried to apologise but Harry brushed it away. "I thought of the people who had a saving Harry thing, I could only come up with two names. Hermione Granger and Poppy Pomfrey, my decision was easy after that. The auror lost out to the healer but I couldn't imagine myself working at St Mungos. My celebrity status would make a mockery of that, there would be people queuing up just to be 'treated' by Harry Potter. I've decided to become a muggle doctor."

He gave this a moment to sink in before continuing. "I will sit my muggle exams in Scotland and then apply to Glasgow, Edinburgh and St Andrews universities. I've already bought a town house in Glasgow and it's entirely muggle, apart from the elf accommodation."

Emma knew Harry was explaining this purely for Hermione's benefit but something was troubling her, she decided just to ask the young

man. "Harry, couldn't you achieve more by keeping your magic? Leaving it behind seems rather a lot to give up."

"Mrs Granger, I'm leaving magical society behind, not my magic. Hermione and I are magical beings, to remove that magic would probably kill us. I will live as a muggle, study as a muggle and hopefully one day practice medicine as a muggle. If the odd bit of magic finds its way into healing a patient or three, no one needs to be any the wiser. I chose Glasgow because I have good memories of Scotland, it's also far enough away from London and the ministry to suit me."

Hermione's voice was unnaturally quiet as she asked him her most important question. "What about me Harry?"

This was where Harry had to show that old hat put him in Gryffindor for a reason. "Hermione, I hope to have you right by my side, helping us to decide just what we do with our lives. I hope I'm not being overconfident here but to me this is a serious relationship, a relationship that will hopefully one day progress into an engagement and then marriage."

This took her breath away, neither noticed her parents weren't breathing too well either at this turn of events. "Harry, are you asking me to marry you?"

"Not yet Hermione, I'm having a big impact here on the lives of you and your family. I'm merely trying to let everyone know where I want this to go. I can understand all your fears, this is life-changing stuff and you haven't had the time to talk it over that I've had."

Hermione leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on Harry's lips, her eyes shining with happiness. "Anytime, any place, my answer will always be the same Harry. You'll get a big yes from me."

Harry was now ready to float away, his greatest fear vanquished, the glare from her father kept him grounded and talking. "If we remained in the magical community it would be just as bad for you, Hermione Potter would be forever known as the wife of the boy-who-lived or some other such rubbish. In the muggle world we're just another two students and free to be whatever we want."

Things may be moving too fast for Emma but she liked what she was hearing now. There had been a growing feeling between her and Dan that they were slowly losing their daughter to a world they didn't understand. What the hell did they know about transfiguration? Going to university was something they not only understood, but could be of help with. These two literally could have the best of both worlds.

Hermione was considering her educational options until Harry said Hermione Potter, she was then ready to agree to anything. He then sweetened the deal even further. "I probably have as much knowledge as most of the professors at Hogwarts and could easily teach you to at least NEWT level. At my new house, there's a room set aside to become a library. We can fill it with whatever books we want! Dobby and Winky have been helping me move around the country so distance is no object either."

Emma just had to say something. "Harry, that sounds wonderful, and certainly something you should consider Hermione." She was beginning to notice just how well these two were suited for each other and there was already talk of a wedding.

Hermione didn't disagree. "I have already resigned myself that I'll return to Hogwarts until my birthday. After that, I can legally walk away from the school with my head held high. I think that's a decision I'll keep quiet about until the proper time, about five minutes before I leave the castle."

This cheered everyone up but Hermione had one more vital question for Harry. "What about Voldemort Harry? He apparently can't be killed and has always come after you in the past."

"Hermione, my message to Luna was that our mothers always watch over us. When I was on the other side, I met a young mother who will have a dramatic effect on all our lives. Her name was Merope Gaunt."

Emma was sure she was the only one who heard Dan's muttered response. "Even when he was dead, he was still attracting women." She would be having some severe words with her husband soon.

-oOoOo-



Albus was staring at the words on the parchment in front of him, attempting to make some sense of them

The colours of a rainbow, so pretty in the sky

Are also in the faces of people going by

I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do

They're really saying I love you

I hear babies cry, I watch them grow

They'll learn much more than I'll ever know

And I think to myself

What a wonderful world.

The old wizard had tried every code translation spell he'd ever learned, and more than a few he'd since researched in his extensive private library. He'd gotten nothing. Severus had been of no help whatsoever, dismissing the entire thing as the hormonal ranting of a teenage boy. This was his only contribution before being summoned by Voldemort.

It wasn't until Alastor arrived in France for his evening shift watching the Grangers that Albus finally understood the purpose of the message. He'd spent hours attempting to unlock the undecipherable, meanwhile the Grangers had vanished without trace. Matilda had returned to France and assumed they'd gone out since the car was missing. Alastor was able to see that the house had been swept clean of any sign of the Grangers.

Things were really going from bad to worse when muggles were now pulling the wool over the eyes of his order!

Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 6

Luna was experiencing an entirely new sensation for her, she was missing her friends. As her dad had to change all their travel plans, it would now be the middle of August before they left on their expedition to Fair Isle. She'd enjoyed spending time with Hermione but the Grangers were now in France. The Burrow felt like it was in mourning since Harry had paid it a visit, Ron was moping while his mother provided the wailing. They didn't appear to understand that Harry wasn't dead, he'd just chosen a different path.

He'd told Luna he would keep in touch and that was good enough for her, Harry always kept his word.

Neville was experiencing the summer of his life, his parents were recovering quicker than anyone thought possible. His letters to her had all been filled with such joy, Luna could almost feel it radiating off the page. Their letter writing had increased in frequency and length of parchment as the summer was progressing. Now Luna was invited to Longbottom manor to meet his parents.

Luna wasn't reading too much into this development, Neville was desperate to introduce his parents to everyone. Meeting friends and family also aided their recovery, getting them back into the swing of things mentally while their bodies caught up.

Luna was still a teenage girl though, a teenage girl who had promised herself she would start looking for a boyfriend. In any boyfriend contest, Luna would place Neville's name almost top of a very short list. Since Harry was looking elsewhere, Neville would now be her number one choice.

First of all though, Neville was her friend. His emotions would be all over the place at the moment and he needed her to be there for him as a friend, not slobbering all over him like some kind of Lavender Brown clone. When Neville finally decided he was looking for a girlfriend, Luna fully intended to be there for that too!

-oOoOo-

"I felt nothing but pity for Merope, yes she'd undoubtedly committed a terrible wrong but she paid an awful price for it. The Gaunts were a dirt-poor old pureblood family that had nothing going for them. She

lived in a shack with her brother and father, both of whom held views considered too extreme even for the pureblood magical community to stomach. Merope had no money, no education, not a great deal of magic and was no beauty either. Her prospects were as grim as the shack she lived in. All the young woman knew was that she had to get away, Merope slipped the local muggle squire's son a love potion and they ran off together."

Harry could see the revulsion in his girlfriend's eyes, using a potion like that was tantamount to rape.

"Merope knew it was wrong but she really did love Tom, loved him so much that she stopped administering the potion. Tom then raced back home, leaving a penniless, rejected and pregnant Merope behind. By the time the baby was due to be born, Merope was so weak that she didn't survive his birth. She possessed just enough strength to tell the staff at the orphanage what she wanted her son named, Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Hermione let out a gasp of shock, she now knew who this woman was. How Voldemort's mother had the bloody cheek to go anywhere near her Harry was something she wanted to hear.

"Merope watched her son grow in the orphanage, the boy had a hard life. He was bullied before discovering there was a power he could call on. This power was explained when, on his eleventh birthday, Tom received a visit from a certain Albus Dumbledore. He was probably academically only second to Hermione in his studies but Tom had a cruelty in him that reflected in everything he did. Merope reminded me a bit of my Aunt Petunia. No matter what their sons' did, there was always extenuating circumstances or someone else to blame. Even when Myrtle was murdered inside Hogwarts, Merope consoled herself with the fact it was the basilisk that killed her."

Harry stopped for a drink of juice as Hermione noticed he was having trouble telling this story. She wondered where it was leading.

"Everything changed in a single day. Tom was still at Hogwarts when his research tracked down his relatives. He murdered his father and both grandparents in their own home, framing his uncle for the killings. Merope's brother died in Azkaban for a crime her son committed."

Harry needed another drink of juice before he could continue. "Merope had led such a shitty life yet now her death was proving to be even worse. She was in her own personal form of hell, looking on as the baby she died giving birth to became the monster we now know as Voldemort. Left helpless and having to watch as he tortured and murdered all those witches, wizards and even children unfortunate enough to cross his path, his callous disregard for life sickened her. It takes a special kind of psychopath to wipe out your entire family while still at school."

Winky popped in beside Harry and offered him a butterbeer, he needed more than fruit juice at the moment.

"Merope though is still his mother and believes there is still some good in him. She's convinced herself that creating those horcruxes has warped his humanity as his soul is in pieces. She offered me the entire knowledge of Voldemort's horcruxes if I would give him a chance once they were destroyed. I happen to think she's delusional but gave my word, the information was too important not to."

"Are they all gone? Is that what you've been doing Harry?"

"Yes Hermione, they're all gone. One was actually inside Hogwarts and I destroyed it the night I trashed the headmaster's office. I deliberately provoked Dumbledore to send me back to the castle. Thanks for slapping him in my defence, I laughed out loud when I read that!"

No mention was made of pensieve memories, neither Harry nor Hermione wanted to give the disgruntled father any more ammunition.

"I also got very lucky on a couple of occasions. There was one hidden inside a cave, complete with an underground lake full of inferi, I really didn't fancy going down there. I couldn't believe it when Winky found the locket when cleaning up Sirius's old place. I have no idea how it got there but had no intention of looking a gift horcrux in the mouth. I also couldn't believe it when Fudge actually helped me, by accident of course."

Harry took another pull of his butterbeer as Hermione noticed him smile for the first time since mentioning Merope.

"One of them was secured deep inside a vault in Gringotts, guarded by a dragon no less, I hadn't a bloody clue how to get at it. By sentencing the Lestrange brothers to the veil of death, he effectively ended their line. I was able to claim their vault because I'm head of the Black family. I took the horcrux and instructed the goblins to transfer all the gold into Tonk's vault, I would love to see her face the next time she visits it."

Hermione was beginning to get some idea of the scale of the problems Harry had been dealing with, no wonder he'd said he was busy!

"There was one hidden in the gaunt shack but, being a parselmouth, it didn't cause me any problems. Especially since Merope had already given me all the passwords. We weren't sure if I would still be able to use that ability since my horcrux was gone, it worked on the other side and here to. The last one on the list gave me the most trouble, Voldemort's enormous snake. I had the place watched but the bloody great beast refused to leave the house. You were so close down that hill yet I daren't come near until I'd taken care of the last one."

"Why did you have to wait Harry?"

"I needed them all taken care of before I approached you. If something had gone wrong and Dumbledore managed to stick his nose in, the entire plan could fall apart. My fear was Voldemort taking his snake and putting it somewhere I could never find it. Yesterday, I got tired of waiting. Just before dawn, I snuck into his hideout and cut its head off!"

Hermione was on her feet before she even realised it, "Harry James Potter, of all the irresponsible things..."

She was interrupted from saying more by her father's roar. Dan had sat while his bullshit detector was going mental as this kid pushed the needle deeper into the dung, that last comment just buried it and ended Dan's patients. "Cut its head off? You'll be telling us next you used a sword! I'm now thinking this is all some fantasy you've invented in whatever that thing is you call a mind. Returning from the dead, hunting bits of soul before triumphing over the bad guys? I say you're either nuts or full of shit! As far as I can see, the only person

watching my family is you. If I don't see some proof right this minute, then we're out of here and you'll never see us again!"

Hermione's anger against Harry taking unnecessary risks was now dwarfed by her ire at her father. She was radiating magic as she glared at him, he'd just stepped way over the line. "How dare you speak to Harry like that! You may be my father but..."

"Hermione love stop! It's easy to say words in anger that then can't be taken back. Your dad wants proof, I can give him proof Hermione."

Harry turned to face Dan as the sword of Gryffindor appeared in his hand. "I killed the snake with this. It's a magical sword that belonged to Godric Gryffindor, I used this to destroy all the horcruxes."

The boy standing there confidently, holding a sword that was unmistakably a lethal weapon, was a whole different prospect for Dan Granger. When he faded from view right before his eyes, Dan was beginning to think he was the nutter and in deep shit.

Harry came back into view beside the telescope and called them over. "I can make myself invisible and some silencing charms do the rest, I was really careful Hermione. Please take a look through the telescope, the lens is charmed to see through invisibility cloaks."

Emma was raging at her husband before she looked through the telescope, she was absolutely livid after it. "That's the woman who stole Hermione's letter. Why is she shimmering?"

"It's the invisibility cloak Mrs Granger."

Dan offered Hermione to go next and received a stern rebuke for his troubles. "I don't need to look for proof, I believed every word Harry said to me. I trust my boyfriend with my life."

The 'my boyfriend' bit was spoken with enough force to ensure Dan got the message, looking through the telescope also confirmed their villa was being watched. The woman was now peering through the patio doors, looking into the villa for them.

Harry then took a stone ring out his pocket and only Hermione recognised that her boyfriend was now incredibly nervous. "I've only

read what this will do, it's the first time I've used it." Harry put the ring on and rotated it around his finger a few times.

Dan was forced to grab his wife as she gave out a partial shriek before fainting where she stood.

"Hey Hermione, looking good! Glad to see Puck here got his act together and asked you out!"

Hermione was staring at the ghostly vision before her, "Sirius? Is that really you? Puck?"

"You didn't think a little thing like death would keep an old dog like me down? Oh, and Puck is your new boyfriend's marauder name. Have you seen his animagus form? He's a horny little devil!"

Harry knew the next voice so well as his mother appeared next to his godfather. "Fanning the flames is not helping my son Sirius, I knew we should have made Remus godfather! Hello Hermione, I'm Harry's mother. So very pleased to meet the girl who's cared for him all these years."

Harry had hit Emma with a wandless ennervate spell, she regained consciousness in her husband's arms. She immediately remembered why she fainted, it would be hard not to with a ghost standing right in front of her. A ghost who was the spitting image of Harry, and not that much older either.

"Hello folks, sorry if we gave you a bit of a scare, it was a bit of a shock to us too! I'm James Potter, Harry's father. I would just like to add that everything my son has said here today has been the truth. Please excuse my hurry but we've only got a moment and I so want to speak with your lovely daughter. We've had the pleasure of watching them together for five years, they really are wonderfully suited for each other."

Harry hated the thought that his mother was standing in front of him, and he couldn't give her a hug.

Lily of course sensed this. "Harry, we shouldn't be here son. This is torture for all of us. Our time has past and that's where we must remain, think of us often but not to the extent where it stops you

living your life. You have a wonderful girl here so tell her everything, her parents also deserve to know why you came back."

Hermione had her arms wrapped around Harry so tightly, they were in danger of becoming one entity. The tears were streaming down her cheeks as she was faced with visible proof of exactly how much Harry had lost. She knew Sirius of course but his mum and dad appeared to have been really nice, and so young! His mother couldn't have been more than four or five years older than Hermione was now.

"Hermione, I so want to hug and kiss my son. Instead, I'll ask you to do it for me. Keep him safe and keep him from brooding. His dad and Sirius managed to install a sense of mischief into him, just ask Dumbledore and Severus! You make him happy dear, nothing else would have seen him return. It's a good job that sister of mine will be dead before I get hold of her, I might just kill her all over again."

James spoke to her next. "You realise that's a full time job and will probably take you the rest of your life?"

Her tears were still flowing but Hermione was smiling now. "That sounds like my kind of job Mr Potter, I just hope I'm up to it."

"Oh please call me James, Mr Potter makes me feel so old! This is Lily and him you can call whatever you want." James was jokingly pointing to Sirius as they began to fade.

"Didn't I tell you two, isn't she fantastic? You should have seen them the night they rescued me."

"How many times do we have to tell you Sirius, we watched the whole bloody thing. James here was jumping up and down like a madman when they flew on that hippogriff to get you out that cell." Lily Potter's fading voice was the last thing they heard for a few minutes, none of the four who were left wanted to break this special moment.

Harry led Hermione back over to the seating area but she refused to be parted from him and sat on his lap. Her parents were helping each other over as both of them had quite the shock.



"I know you'll tell me how you did that later Harry, at the moment I'm just too shocked that I got to meet your mum and dad. I also can't believe that they liked me."

"Hermione, what's not to like? They absolutely adore you, and you just heard my godfather's opinion. I've got one more thing to tell you and then I think we could all do with a break before dinner. I asked what would happen if I didn't come back, it wasn't pretty Hermione."

Emma, like her daughter, had tears flowing since the ghosts appeared. Seeing how much it had cost this young man to do that was very painful, especially since it was Dan who had forced the issue. Their instant and absolute acceptance of Hermione was another wound that hurt deep, Emma was unsure if she could take anymore.

Harry though, only had eyes for Hermione. "With me dead and you severely injured, your parents made the only logical decision they could. They took you out of Hogwarts and left the magical community. What they didn't know was that Malfoy again got off scot-free while Dumbledore remained a wanted man. The blond prick used his influence at the ministry and the Grangers had the existence of magic obliterated from their memories."

Harry felt Hermione tense up on his knee. "Malfoy would have come after me and I wouldn't even know who he was. Is that what happened Harry?"

"I honestly don't know Hermione, you were lost to the magical world so couldn't be tracked on the other side. Malfoy coming after you was my guess to. They burned the Weasleys and the Lovegoods to the ground while Neville's gran packed and got them both out the country. I had to come back Hermione, even death couldn't take away my saving people thing."

Harry had tried for humour but Hermione just buried her face in his shirt and hid.

Emma didn't want to add to the torment but the mother in her really needed to know something. "Harry, why would you even consider not coming back?"

It was a still tearful Hermione who answered, there was venom in her voice though and she left no doubt at whom it was directed. "Because his life here is shit! At school he's either the saviour or the next dark lord. If that isn't bad enough, he nearly bloody dies at least once a year. I haven't forgotten that cupboard comment or his mum wanting to meet her sister. Ron told me they had bars on his bedroom window and I thought he was exaggerating. If I get my wand on the Dursleys, Lily might meet her sister sooner than she thinks. If that's not bad enough, my own father has to put the boot in too!"

She now rounded on her dad. "Harry was completely honest with you, laid his soul bare. I know how hard that must have been for him and it just made me love my Harry more. How dare you say those things about him. As far as I'm concerned, there's only one nutter here and it's not Harry!"

Hermione ran into the house, trying not to cry. Emma was trying to decide between following her daughter and ripping her husband a new one.

Dan read his wife's dilemma correctly and offered advice. "Go and check on Hermione, no matter what you said to me, I couldn't feel any worse than I do at the moment."

Harry interrupted before anyone could move. "Hermione will be fine, Winky will look after her for now. I really need to speak with you both. By killing that snake, Voldemort is going to know that I really am a threat. There is no way to predict what he'll do next, I want Hermione close to me so she'll be safe. There are enough junior death eaters around who have told him how best to hurt me. I would like you to spend the rest of your holiday here, hopefully we can get to know one another better. Please don't think that means we're confined to the villa, though I would change the rental car and any plans already discussed while others could be listening."

Emma attempted a smile. "I would like that very much Harry. We'll go and collect our stuff if you want to go and check Hermione's all right for us. I'm sure it's you she'd rather see."

Harry stood to follow Hermione before he spoke. "Please let Dobby collect your things, no one will see him and it'll only take a few minutes. Call for him when you need to go to your room, he'll show

you where it is. Let him know what time you want dinner and he'll make sure we're all there."

As Harry left, Dan had his face in his hands. "It's not steak I should be eating but humble pie! How am I going to fix this?"

Emma wasn't for letting him off the hook though. "Everyone we spoke to, including your daughter, told us what an extraordinary young man her Harry was. That simply wasn't good enough for Daniel Granger, the boy had literally to dig his parents up to prove he wasn't a nutter. It may have escaped your notice but our Hermione is in love with that young man, even you must see he feels the same way about her. That's our future son-in-law yet you just treated him like dog shit on your shoe. What possessed you to act like that?"

"I honestly don't know. The shock of seeing my little princess wrapped around him like that reduced my IQ to single digits. Neanderthal took over and I just saw him as a threat to my family. Did you notice how young his parents were? Remus said they were twenty-one but seeing them just blew me away. They instantly adored Hermione yet I treated Harry abysmally. When I saw him standing there with that sword, I thought for an instant he was going to attack me. If Hermione's in any danger, I want her as near to Harry and those little beings as possible. They can protect her, we can't."

"You keep thinking like that Dan and we might just get our daughter back. Back in our world, attending university alongside a young man who wants to marry her, does that remind you of anyone?"

Dan actually cringed. "I now understand the saying that daughters are nature's revenge on fathers. When I saw them, I immediately thought of us! What would we have done in that position?"

They both knew the answer to that and had Hermione as evidence. "Do you think Harry will forgive me?"

"I don't think it's Harry you've got to worry about, that's the first time I can remember Hermione raising her voice to you. Your image as the perfect father crashed and burned today Dan, regaining that is going to be a lot harder than Harry's forgiveness. Hermione now has a

new man in her life, a knight who apparently battles trolls and dragons in his spare time."

"Yeah, you forgot he can also turn into an owl, pull a magical sword out of thin air and become invisible. They don't cover that in any parenting manual I've ever seen."

-oOoOo-

Albus flood at once to the dungeon quarters that Severus occupied, his patronus message had said it was urgent. The headmaster was alarmed to discover his friend hadn't been exaggerating, quite the opposite in fact. Severus appeared as if he'd been towed behind the Hogwarts express, all the way from London. Albus had to ask the obvious question. "Severus, what happened?"

His battered and bruised face barely managed to utter 'Potter' before Severus lost consciousness. Albus reckoned it was only his portkey that allowed him to return to the castle, he certainly was in no condition to apparate or even floo.

He gently levitated Severus onto the bed before beginning some medical scans, with Poppy now on holiday, it was either up to Albus to heal his potions professor or there would need to be a trip to St Mungo's.

Albus was reading a lot of cruciatus damage but there were other injuries complicating matters. Broken ribs and soft tissue damage amongst the most serious. Severus had been given a right going over that would require time to heal, that he mentioned Harry's name had Albus quickly reaching for the appropriate potions. The quicker he began the healing process, the sooner he would discover just what the hell was going on.

-oOoOo-

Harry knocked on the bedroom door before sticking his head inside, he was greeted by the sight of Hermione lying on the bed crying. He went to his girlfriend at once. "Hey Hermione, don't cry. Please tell me what's wrong so I can fix it."

Hermione wiped her eyes before turning around, she was not going to turn into a brunette version of Cho. "Oh Harry, after all you've been through, my dad treating you like that was the last straw."

"Hermione, I have no problem with your father, it's a male thing. Anyone coming sniffing around our nearly seventeen year old daughter is going to experience much worse!"

Hermione couldn't believe what she just heard, she needed confirmation. "Our daughter Harry?" She also couldn't believe he didn't even blush when he answered.

"Well, I assumed you wanted children. Not right away of course, I've a feeling I'm going to be very busy between studying and teaching my beautiful girlfriend everything I know." Harry saw the sparkle begin to return to her eyes.

"Harry, I know I must look a mess, you don't need to lie. I've already agreed to say yes."

"Hermione, you know I don't lie. To me, you're the most beautiful girl in the world."

This drew a small smile. "Well, since yours is the only opinion in the world that matters to me, I'm happy with that. What happens now Harry?"

"Well the Grangers are now my guests for the rest of their stay in France."

Hermione let out a harrumph sound. "My dad will never go for that!"

Harry gave his girlfriend a reassuring smile. "He already has. By now, Voldemort will know his snake is dead. Hopefully, this will lead him to discovering that Tom Riddle is once more mortal. His mother told me he was terrified of death so we have no way of predicting what will happen next. There's also the fact that he doesn't know I lied about the prophecy..."

"What! You just said you never lie. What was the real prophecy?"

"I'd never lie to you Hermione. Voldemort, Dumbledore, Fudge and their ilk are all fair game. As I said to Ron, Trelawney made the

prophecy, I'm not going to lose any sleep over it. Surely you would much rather be learning about wandless magic or the animagus transformation?"

"You may have gotten a lot smoother Potter but don't think I didn't notice you were changing the subject. You should know that doesn't work with me, let's hear it."

Hermione's brows furrowed in concentration as Harry told her the prophecy. "This is so vague, it could be interpreted a number of different ways. Why was Dumbledore so fixated on the one?"

Harry shook his head. "Haven't you noticed, magical people suffer from a tendency to do that. When a solution presents itself, they count that as problem solved and stop looking. The idea that there could be a better way just doesn't enter their heads. Parchment, quills and candles immediately spring to mind."

She was a lot less worried having heard the prophecy, Hermione detested divination and thought this was a prime example. The prophecy was so open-ended, practically any set of circumstances could be said to fulfil it. Hermione nodded in understanding before changing the subject herself. "Will we really be able to pass exams and get into university?" Hermione was in need of some reassurance and Harry provided it.

"Hermione, have you ever failed an exam? You'll find I'm the same Harry but with a whole different attitude to studying and exams. I know I could make a difference as a doctor but I also know it won't be easy. If I can somehow combine modern medical science with my magical knowledge, who knows what could be achieved? There are also the Potter and Black fortunes to backup any research we want to do. I've had a long time to think this over while you've just had it dumped in your lap. There's no hurry though, university is at least a year away. We've plenty of time to discuss what we want to do, your mum and dad could be a great help."

Hermione's expression darkened at the mention of her parents so Harry gave her a gentle kiss. "Hermione, I've rented this place for the entire summer, I was hoping to spend most of it with you. For that to happen, we need your parents' approval and permission."

This got Hermione's full attention. "Mum's vote should be easy, she's a Shakespeare fanatic. Puck and Hermione? She probably thinks we're preordained by the bard to be together."

"You mean written in Stratford-upon-Avon, instead of the stars?"

This got a giggle out of Hermione. "Oh really smooth Potter, you should use that line on her. While on the subject of smooth, what's this I'm hearing about flowers, jewellery and even kisses being dispatched to witches up and down the country?"

"You don't know about Neville then? He offered to wear my name on his back and I'm sure he kissed me when I healed his parents."

Hermione fell in love with the old Harry, she couldn't help but think this new model was an improvement. The main difference appeared to be Harry was so comfortable in his own skin. She'd attempted to tease him and he returned it with interest, Hermione loved it! She tried to keep the teasing going by running her fingers through his hair and asking her next question. "Oh Harry, what did you say to his generous offer."

"I told him that if you knocked me back I would consider it. I also told him that Luna was ahead of him on the list. I didn't have the heart to point out that Millicent Bulstrode was also ahead of him. I think I would still choose Neville before Pansy though, Fang would be preferable to Draco's girlfriend."

Hermione couldn't keep it up and had to laugh, Harry took this as a good sign and continued. "I went to see McGonagall first, it wouldn't have seemed right to leave Hogwarts without saying goodbye to her. Then Cho and Parvati got flowers for putting up with me. Luna's necklace has as much defensive magic poured into it as I could manage, anyone firing curses at her is going to get a shock. I've got something similar for you and your parents, I thought it would be better if they got to know me first before I started handing out gifts."

Hermione gently kissed him. "You sir are a wonderful boyfriend!"

"I'm trying Hermione but you're making it very hard for me. I think our first kiss was mostly responsible for your dad's outburst earlier, perhaps we need to give him some time to get used to us as a

couple. I'm going to take a cold shower and change, I'll meet you out by the pool. Please don't wear the white bikini though."

This confused Hermione, "Why, don't you like it?"

"Hermione, I saw you in it yesterday and hours later a snake got its head chopped off! Like doesn't quite do my opinion justice. I'll see you after my shower."

Harry left the room to the sound of Hermione giggling, considering she'd been crying when he entered, he was very happy with that.

-oOoOo-

Severus had barely opened his eyes before Albus had his head lifted and another potion was passing his lips. He felt the pain begin to wane and gladly accepted one more to help heal his injuries. His head was back on the pillow as he lay there with his eyes closed, allowing the potions to perform their magic.

"Severus, do you feel up to talking? How was Harry involved in your injuries?"

Severus kept his eyes closed as he slowly told his story. "Potter ghosted into the dark lord's lair last night and chopped the head clean off his familiar. Apparently the dark lord's anger reached new heights and he executed the three guards who were on duty. They didn't die quickly as he was determined to discover who had betrayed him." He had to pause and ask for a drink before continuing.

"Wormtail was then called and they both disappeared for the rest of the day. When he summoned me, his mood was, if anything worse and Wormtail didn't return with him. The dark lord called me a liar and demanded to know the truth about the Potter brat. My answer that the boy was nothing more than a mediocre wizard was not well received." Severus gave an involuntary shudder at the memory.

-o- earlier -o-

"Crucio! Could a mediocre wizard do this?" Voldemort was in a rage as he tore the bandage from his head, revealing a bleeding lightning



bolt shaped scar. Severus was writhing in agony on the floor when a spell picked him up and hurtled him into the wall.

"Could a mediocre wizard get past my wards and guards? Committing murder while we slept in our beds!" Severus was lying in a heap at the base of the wall when he was again picked up and hurled across the room, smashing into the opposite wall with even greater force.

"Could a mediocre wizard have defeated my death eaters and killed Bellatrix at the ministry?"

Severus found himself once more prostrate at the feet of the dark lord. "Crucio! You are either a liar or incompetent Snape, I need to know which it is? Legilimens!"

He had no problem letting the dark lord see and hear what he really thought of the Potter brat, Severus really did think the boy-who-lived was a mediocre wizard with delusions of adequacy. Fortunately for him, the dark lord recognised the truth as Severus saw it and didn't search any further. The physical battering and bouts of cruciatus had scrambled his mental defences.

"Well Snape, it would appear Potter is more of a Slytherin than we thought, he easily concealed his true worth from you. Hardly surprising considering the way you've treated him. You're supposed to be head of the house of the cunning yet got outsmarted by a Gryffindor? How disappointing, get this thing out of my sight!"

He was grabbed by rough hands before Severus found himself dragged along the floor and thrown down the steps at the front door.

-o- present -o-

Albus was now really troubled. "This raises more than a few questions. Where did Harry get the information to find Voldemort and then why waste that vital intelligence just to kill a snake?"

Severus had at least a partial answer for him. "I don't know the how but the why is easy, and classic dark lord tactics. Potter publicly threatened the dark lord with retribution if he went anywhere near his friends. Now, he's just proven that he knows where the dark lord is and that his best defences won't stop him. I saw fear in the dark

lord's eyes today, something about that snake's death terrified him. Granger could probably slap him in front of all his death eaters and the dark lord wouldn't dare retaliate."

Albus unconsciously rubbed his own cheek where he'd felt the wrath of Miss Granger and let his colleague know what he'd missed. "That note to Miss Granger was nothing more than a red herring. While it was being delivered to me, the Grangers used the distraction to vanish."

This was also a shock to Severus. "So now we're left with no leads and even fewer ideas, is Minerva still refusing to speak to you?"

"She, like the rest of the country, blames me for Harry Potter leaving. She also blames me for Sirius Black's death. I have to say though, Cornelius had played this whole situation brilliantly. He led the ministry in taking a step backward, leaving me standing out there alone to take the blame. If Harry Potter isn't in the castle come the first of September, I fear we may not see the Halloween feast at Hogwarts. The public will demand a scapegoat and our heads would be served up on a silver platter."

That was the least of the potion master's worries. "The way the dark lord is culling his death eaters, I'll be grateful just to see Halloween!"

Albus understood his friend's trepidation. "Have you any idea where Voldemort and Peter Pettigrew went?"

"No, only that Wormtail didn't return. The way the dark lord has been behaving lately, I wouldn't fancy his chances after spending the day in his company."

-oOoOo-

Peter was actually a lot closer than either of the two wizards in the dungeons would believe. A rat was currently scurrying up and down a certain seventh floor corridor.

His master had given him explicit instructions on how to make the correct door appear. Peter was just having a great deal of trouble concentrating on what he'd been told to, he'd just experienced quite the day.

His master had led him to an old dilapidated shack that had fairly bristled with wards. The dark lord's anger at not finding what he was searching for meant that the shack was no longer dilapidated, it no longer existed!

The cave had scared Peter witless, more specifically what lurked beneath the surface of the murky water. When his master recognised that a decoy had been substituted in place of what he sought, Peter feared he would be joining the occupants of the underground lake.

Discovering he was needed for a special mission really raised his spirits, he didn't even care it was inside Hogwarts. Being discovered by Dumbledore was preferable to swimming with inferi.

When the door eventually appeared, the rat became a wizard and quickly slipped inside. Peter had spent over an hour carefully listening to his master describe exactly where to find the item he wanted, only to realise that it had been a total waste of time. The item in question was lying on the floor just inside the door, that the tiara was halved in two stopped any thoughts of celebrating the completion of his mission.

Peter was not the smartest person amongst the death eaters but you would have to be a complete moron not to recognise this was very bad news. He picked up the pieces and placed them inside the pouch his master had given him for that task. He briefly considered getting himself 'caught' but dismissed the idea, he'd aligned himself to the dark lord and his fate was tied to his. Ending up in custody at the ministry was a poor option for him now. The minister was currently bending over backwards to please Harry Potter, sentencing the betrayer of his parents to the veil of death would certainly do that. Peter would just have to return to his master and hope that he would survive.

A/N Thanks for reading.

## No Hurry At All

Disclaimer: Since I'm not the owner of these characters, I will probably do things with them that you don't like or agree with. Sorry in advance but that's the nature of fan fiction. To do otherwise kind of defeats the purpose of writing fan fiction, and copying JKR word for word would certainly see a lawsuit heading in my direction.

Alert – this chapter was becoming too long for my editor software to cope with, I ended up splitting it into two. The bad news is chapter 7 now ends in a cliffy. The good news though is that you get this one earlier and chapter 8 in a few days.

### Chapter 7

Dan was reduced to the role of spectator while his daughter and her boyfriend sat holding hands, staring intently into each other's eyes. At first glance, this may appear perfectly normal behaviour for two teenagers who profess to being in love. That in over an hour they hadn't said a word to each other, nor moved a muscle, was what concerned the parent.

Emma arrived by the pool and sat beside her husband, the kids were currently occupying her usual spot in the shade.

"Tell me again what they're doing?"

"Dan, relax! It's perfectly safe or Harry wouldn't be doing it with Hermione. I can't remember what he called it but he's basically sharing memories with her. Harry thinks it will allow Hermione to learn what he's trying to teach her faster. Can you imagine our daughter saying no to that?"

"I can't imagine Hermione saying no to Harry at all, that's at least half my problem with the lad."

Emma understood her husband perfectly, Hermione was now a young woman but her father didn't want to let her grow up. "You know Harry can read minds?"

"You're joking, right?"

She tried not to giggle at her husband's panicked expression. "Don't worry dear, Hermione told me it's illegal unless you have the person's permission. Anyway, Harry wouldn't need to be a mind reader to know what you think of him."

Dan had his face in his hands again. "I'm trying love, but it's hard. I've been Hermione's confidant and protector for her whole life. Now I've not only been replaced, but totally outclassed. I used to have to coax tiny details about how bad her time at school was. Now, here she is actually sharing her mind with Harry. How am I meant to compete with that?"

Emma released a sigh of frustration. "Dan, don't you get it? It's not a competition. Our daughter loves us, Hermione just loves Harry differently. Can you even imagine someone more suitable for her?"

Emma's voice softened as she reminisced. "I remember well those afternoons, Hermione sitting on your knee. She looked so lost while telling you that Brenda Johnston was pulling her hair and making fun of her teeth so everyone else would laugh at her. I was so jealous that it was you she confided in and not me. I had to remind myself that we were a team and that I should just be happy that she would open up to one of us. We work best as a team Dan but have you ever seen a better 'team' than those two? Even before linking minds and sharing memories, they appeared to know what the other one was thinking."

She gave her husband a peck on the cheek. "Harry's not competition Dan, he's a new and very valued member of team Granger!"

Dad didn't get the opportunity to answer as both kids came out of their self-induced trance. Hermione wore a wide smile as she gave her boyfriend a quick kiss. "Harry, that was amazing! Mum, dad, I'm going to be an owl too! Harry guided me through the process and I could see my form. Oh, I'm so excited! We're going to have a quick swim to get the blood flowing again and then we'll all have lunch."

Hermione then pushed Harry into the pool before diving in after him. The sounds and splashes of two teenagers being just teenagers actually helped Dan as his wife blew away the last of his instinctive protective parent defences.

"There's a perfect example of what I've just said. Neither you nor I would have the faintest clue in how to help our daughter turn into an owl. Harry does and just look at how happy that makes her. That's how the team works Dan. When they start looking at university courses, who do you think they'll be coming to for advice? We help and support where we can. Harry's Hermione's choice, and I happen to think she's made a very good one. Would you prefer her other friend instead?"

Dan had only witnessed one argument between the two, it was enough to tell him there could never be a relationship there. Comparing that to the way Harry comforted her and tried to stop Hermione arguing with her parents told the father that she'd made the right choice.

Two laughing kids emerged from the pool, a wave of Harry's hand and both were dry before they reached the seated area for lunch. Dan had to admit he was eating better than any five star hotels they had ever visited. Dobby and Winky had a way of making the simplest of dishes appear new, exciting and absolutely delicious. Dan was again brought back to his wife's words from earlier as Harry appeared to be reading his mind.

"Mr and Mrs Granger, I've got something here that I'd like you both to wear."

Harry handed over a pair of his and hers matching designer watches. "While these items are obviously watches, they have a few other very important functions. You have seen me sharing memories with Hermione, unfortunately it is also possible for someone to take memories from you against your will. These have runes etched into them, which effectively act as a dampening field around you. This makes it impossible for anyone to read your thoughts while you're wearing one of these."

"Harry, these are beautiful, and clearly very expensive."

"Mrs Granger, you and your husband now know my secrets. I want them, and of course both of you, kept safe. These also have shield charms on them, offering protection, and are also voice-activated portkeys that will take you somewhere safe if the need arises."

Dan was in awe of this gift. Here was Harry doing exactly what he himself wanted to do, protect his family. He'd done so by means not available to any dentist so Dan took his wife's words to heart. He graciously accepted this wonderful gift. "Thanks very much Harry, I'm assuming you have something similar for Hermione?"

Harry smiled at the amount of progress made. "That's what prompted me to offer these, after this morning, I just had to give this to her."

Hermione opened the box to find an intricate gold chain with a very recognisable gold charm hanging from the end of it. A miniature horned owl, made from gold but with chips of emeralds for eyes, suddenly became Hermione's favourite piece of jewellery.

Even Dan couldn't object to the thank-you kiss his daughter gave Harry. Not only was this an exquisite piece of custom-made jewellery, it also offered his daughter protection from harm. He couldn't possibly object to that.

Hermione ended the kiss and her eyes were sparkling. "I've just had a brilliant idea!"

The rest of them held their breath.

-oOoOo-

Ron wasn't eating his breakfast with the same enthusiasm or gusto he normally dedicated to the task. Not that he'd cut down on the amount of food on the plate, he just didn't seem to enjoy it as much. There was a brand-new Firebolt sitting in the corner that belonged to him and had yet to be flown. He was trying to resist out of obstinacy but his will was weakening. That Ginny kept placing it within his line of sight didn't help, which was exactly why the little minx kept doing it.

His eyes were drawn from the Firebolt to the horned owl that had just silently flown through the open window. It landed in front of Ron and held out its leg to deliver the message it carried.

"It's from Hermione!"

The twins, as usual couldn't pass up any opportunity to tease.

"Oh, better not tell Lavender."

"Yes, Ron Ron would be in real trouble."

"Getting letters from another girl."

"If you two don't shut-it, I won't tell you what it says. Mum, you need to hear this!"

Miss Hermione Granger cordially invites the Weasley Family to join her and some friends in celebrating the birthday of the guest of honour, Mr Harry James Potter. This invitation will act as a portkey, activating at ten a.m. on the thirty first of July.

Molly now had different tears in her eyes than the ones that had been flowing all too often recently. "Oh, we're going to get to see Harry, on his birthday too! I better start working on his cake."

"Wait, there's a note here as well."

Hi Weasleys,

This is my owl Puck. Hedwig is just too famous to carry mail at the moment, at least that's what we told her. He's also a very clever owl so just tell him if you can make it.

Love

Hermione

Ron couldn't quite hide his indignation. "Make it? Of course we'll make it. Do you think you'll remember that Puck? Only Hermione could find an owl that's as smart as she is."

Puck sprang into the air, flying a quick circuit around the room and cuffing Ron with his wings before landing on the table again.

"Oi, that's certainly Hermione's owl. Bloody mental, same as she is!"

Ron was saved from further attack by Ginny soothing Puck's ruffled feathers. "Ron, Hermione said this is a smart owl, then you go and insult her in front of the bird. You and Lavender are well matched."



The twins were chuckling at this while their mother had dashed off to check on whether she had all the ingredients needed for Harry's cake.

Ron wasn't laughing though, he'd just thought of a serious problem. "Do you think Hermione would mind if I brought Lavender along?"

The twins appeared to find this incredibly funny.

"Harry's hiding out from the ministry."

"Dumbledore."

"You-know-who."

"And Ron wants to invite Lavender?"

"Oh he's got it bad Fred."

"Yeah, Let's invite Rita Skeeter too!"

Ron's good mood had just evaporated. "I can't go."

Fred, George and Ginny all managed to say 'what?' at the same time.

It was a dejected Ron who explained his reasoning. "If I take Lavender, she'll blab it all over Britain."

George just had to answer, "I believe we just said that little brother."

"And if I go to a party without my girlfriend?"

It was Ginny who this time supplied the answer. "Oh right, now I get it. Go to Harry's party without Lavender and she'll dump your arse, tough call Ron."

Puck walked in front of Ron and began bobbing its head up and down.

"What, you understood that?"

This time a certain bob in answer.

"Does this mean that Lavender can go to the party?"

Again, an unmistakable few bobs of Puck's head.

"Brilliant, wait until I tell her she's invited to Harry's birthday party. Parvati will be so jealous."

Ginny wasn't so sure. "Ron, are you going to take an owl bobbing its head as a means of conversation?"

"Normally no, but Hermione said he was a smart owl. You all saw Puck, he practically spoke to us!"

George was now studying the owl very closely. "Yes we all saw, but what did we see?"

Puck turned his head toward the twins and winked one of its green eyes at them. Both twins glanced toward each other before bursting into laughter.

Harry flew from the Burrow, leaving it a much happier place than when he found it.

-oOoOo-

Harry thought Frank and Alice were looking amazing, considering they'd just spent the last fourteen years in hospital. All the Longbottoms quickly agreed to attend and Neville was now opening his gift.

Hey Nev

I know this is a couple of days early but Puck agreed to carry it for me. It has no name on the back, a special lady said yes and I hope you're not too disappointed?

Hope to see you soon

Harry

Neville was laughing as he removed the finely crafted dragon hide vest from the parcel. "Tell Harry thanks and no problem. Will you be delivering an invitation to Luna?"

Alice was chuckling, "Neville, it's an owl. You can't expect it to answer you..."

She stopped as Puck was nodding its head up and down in answer to Neville's question.

"Mum, if Hermione says this bird is smart, then it could probably pass its OWLS."

"Oh Neville, what a terrible joke. Do I detect you're sweet on this Hermione girl?"

"Hermione is brilliant, and a great friend. She's been Harry's girl since first year, everyone could see it but them. They're together now though so you'll get to meet her soon. I kinda like Luna."

The last bit was said quieter than the rest but his mother quickly picked up on it. "Oh I like her son, so full of life. Have you asked her yet?"

"No mum."

His dad's arm was now around his shoulders. "I know that's the hard part son but Luna's already a friend. If she says no, she'll do it nicely and you'll still be friends. Not that I think there's the slightest chance she'll say no."

With Neville the centre of attention, no one noticed Puck doing a happy little owl dance before flying away. Harry was happier than he could say for his friend.

-oOoOo-

Harry was having so much fun, he almost forgot what he was supposed to be doing here. He didn't know where Remus or Tonks lived and didn't possess the abilities of a post owl. Fortunately, he had an exceptional one to show him the ropes. He was loving flying with Hedwig and couldn't wait for Hermione to master her

transformation so she could join them. Hedwig indicated a tiny cottage at the edge of the woods before retreating out of sight.

Remus was reading a book as Puck flew through the window. He quickly read the invitation and note before calling in to the other room. "Hey Dora!"

"Alright Wolfie, where's the fire? Oh what a beautiful owl, who's the message from?"

"Hermione, we're both invited to Harry's birthday party."

Tonks was over in a flash, reading the invitation and the note. "Hey Puck, if you're so clever, perhaps you can tell me how all that gold ended up in my account?"

"Oh, this owl's so smart, I'll bet it could. Isn't that right Harry?"

Tonks may be clumsy but she was far from stupid. She caught on immediately what Remus meant. "Are you sure?"

"Green eyes, black horns that stick up like the messy Potter hair and then there's the name. Puck was a name Sirius just loved. Lily dragged us off to see a performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and Sirius thought it was hysterical. An embarrassed Lily had to explain to him at the interval that the character's name was Puck, and not what he thought it was. Sirius just laughed all the harder. There's also the fact that I'm a werewolf, I can smell that's Harry!"

Puck quickly transformed into a laughing Harry. "That's a brilliant story Remus, you have to tell me the full thing. Hey Tonks!"

Both bodies hit him at the same time, Tonks nearly had them over.

The emotion in Remus's voice was unmistakable. "You frightened years off my life Harry, years I can't afford to lose."

Tonks gave her boyfriend time to compose himself. "Aw shut up old man, sit and read your book so I can hug the boy-who-lived in peace."

Harry just loved the banter between these two. Unlike Ron and Hermione, it was always in jest with no intentions of hurting the other's feelings. Remus though wanted some answers. "I'll tell you that story Harry if you'll tell me yours?"

"Sorry Remus, not something I can do at the moment. I appreciate your support with Dumbledore though, thanks for that."

Tonks pulled him around to face her. "Care to tell me how over a million galleons found its way into my vault Harry, I nearly had a bloody heart attack on the spot! Thanks but we don't need your charity Harry"

"Tonks, it wasn't charity but an inheritance. That money came out a death eater's account, I wanted to do some good with it. The only other people with a possible claim were the Malfoys, no way I wanted it going to them. I assumed you'd use some of it to take care of your parents, so job done there. You were badly injured by that psycho bitch, look on this as compensation. Bellatrix certainly won't need it where she is now."

Tonks engulfed him in her arms, this would make such a difference to quite a few lives. Remus though tried to continue the playful banter.

"So Harry, you're Hermione's Puck now?"

"Yes Remus, just like Tonks here is your Dora. Isn't it about time you made an honest woman of her? She's quite the catch you know. Young, beautiful, career woman, smart as a whip and wealthy too! If I wasn't already taken, I might just go after her myself."

Both now had their jaws hanging open, wondering where the hell this was coming from. They had been expecting a broody teen, mourning the loss of his godfather. For Remus, this was almost like talking to James or Sirius.

"What Remus, don't you think she's beautiful?"

This shook the marauder out of his stupor. "Well of course I do, get your eyes of my woman Potter."

Harry was now laughing. "Hey Remus, no ring on the finger yet? That means this beautiful lady here is still available."

Tonks started running her fingers through Harry's hair. This was too good to miss, being able to tease Remus and Harry at the same time. "Just how serious are you about this Granger girl Harry love, any chance your mind could be changed?"

"Sorry Miss Tonks, she owns my heart and has already said yes."

Tonks had underestimated him again. "What, you've already asked her? Hey Wolfie, you want to get some pointers from Harry. He knows how to treat a lady."

"I'll even be best man if you want Remus."

The marauder was confused, not a situation he was used to. "What are you trying to pull here Harry?"

Harry now became very serious. "When I saw Hermione injured at the ministry, I realised what I could lose. After what happened to Sirius, I decided to live my life like there's no tomorrow. I know that's what he would want. I've been given a second chance Remus and I don't intend to waste a moment of it. Second chances aren't restricted only to me."

The banter was over now, Remus had a grip on both Harry's arms. "What you did for Frank and Alice was wonderful and you're right. I've been re-evaluating what's important in life since that night in the ministry. The fact that we're at war was brought crashing home to all of us. We'll be at your party and might even have an announcement to make ourselves."

Harry was swiftly and unceremoniously knocked out the way as Tonks jumped on Remus. They ended up on the floor and both were oblivious to the world around them. Harry was given a small taste of how Mr Granger must have felt, he got the Puck out of there.

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This was the one Hermione had been worried about, Harry had promised not to hang about. The formal Hogwarts staff table wasn't used during the holidays, rather the staff still in the castle used a

smaller, round table. It has to be said though, any table that could accommodate Hagrid hardly deserved the description of small. There were currently five there having lunch. Albus, Severus, Pomona, Hagrid and Minerva were barely managing to maintain a polite conversation when their meal was interrupted by Puck.

That Minerva and Hagrid were receiving letters at lunchtime from the same owl piqued everyone's attention. Minerva couldn't resist taunting Albus as she spoke to the owl.

"Please tell Hermione I'll be there."

Hagrid wasn't so subtle. "As if I would miss Harry's birthday party."

Puck nodded once and then shot out of there, leaving two smirking and two shocked people behind. Pomona just sat quietly, eagerly anticipating the unexpected lunchtime entertainment.

"Minerva, am I to assume that correspondence was from Miss Granger?"

"You can assume all you want headmaster, this is not Hogwarts business. Am I to assume you're not having the Grangers watched? I can't help but notice you didn't receive an invite to Mr Potter's party. Since Miss Granger is arranging it though, that's hardly surprising."

Severus tried his luck. "Where is this party Hagrid?"

The great hall echoed with the half giant's laughter. "Yeh actually think Hermione would write tha' down? Tha' girl is the smartest witch I ever met."

Albus wouldn't give it up though, this was the only lead they had. "Minerva, it is imperative I speak with Harry. If you won't tell me where he is, could I at least impose on you to take a letter to him?"

"No, the best I will do is pass on a verbal message."

Albus didn't want anyone else knowing what he planned to say to Harry. "I'm sorry Minerva, that's not acceptable."

Minerva just shrugged her shoulders. "Fair enough Albus, one less thing for me to worry about." She had been asked a favour by Harry and had every intention of granting it, Albus though could go and whistle. She couldn't wait to see her friend's expression when Minerva told her. Both she and Hagrid quickly finished their lunch, got up and left without another word being spoken.

Albus had expected some negotiations to take place, not to be just dismissed like that. Things were certainly changing, and not for the better.

-oOoOo-

Puck flew down and offered Luna her invitation, the owl was greeted by a wide smile. "Harry, does Hedwig know you're delivering mail for Hermione?"

Harry changed back with a bemused expression on his face. "Do I have Potter stamped on my feathers or something? How did you know it was me?"

"I can read magical auras Harry. No two are exactly the same and yours is unmistakable, even as an owl. I take it this is something else you want me to keep secret?" Luna's smile never faltered.

"Yes please Luna, so will I see you at my party?"

"Oh yes, will Neville be going?"

"Funny you should say that, he asked me the exact same thing."

It was now Luna's turn for the bemused expression. "Why would Neville ask if Neville was going?" She managed to hold it for a minute while Harry floundered before her musical laughter gave the game away. "Oh Harry, that's an old one. I can't believe you fell for that!"

Harry was smiling as he reminded himself Luna might play the ditzy blond to perfection, but she was a very smart girl. "Luna, you and Neville will be well matched. Both of you have terrible senses of humour."

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Tom Riddle was a very worried dark lord, the note from the youngest Black placed in the fake horcrux really hit home. Just who could he trust? Did Malfoy really not know what he was doing when his diary was also destroyed?

He now had to assume all his anchors were gone and he no longer possessed enough soul to split it any further. Creating that last one in Nagini had been a terrible experience. Whether it was his new body or placing the horcrux in a living creature, he knew it couldn't be tried again without killing himself.

As terrifying as that was, he had another problem that could be just as devastating. Everyone now knew the story of Potter's threat against him. If he didn't react to that threat in some way, then he was as good as dead. At the first sign of weakness, his followers would desert in droves. Not that he had droves of followers left. He couldn't even kill that useless Wormtail because he was one of his best servants still available to him. He would have to launch an attack and had the very day in mind. First though, they had to move to a different location. "Wormtail, come here!"

-oOoOo-

Poppy Pomfrey was actually excited at attending a sixteen-year-olds' birthday party. She had to sit down when Minerva told her she'd been asked as a favour to contact and invite Harry's favourite healer. There were rumours of Harry healing his injured friends in the ministry, and what he'd achieved with the Longbottoms had given her profession a long overdue kick up the backside. Poppy couldn't think of a healer in the country who wouldn't be excited to meet this young man

She portkeyed with Minerva to a large room where Miss Granger was organising everything. Her excitement only grew when she realised that Frank and Alice Longbottom were there as well, this was going to be quite the afternoon.

"Ok, I need everyone to hide until our guest of honour arrives. He'll be along soon and everyone knows the drill, we jump out and shout surprise."

There were no murmurs of dissent, not when Hermione was organising something. Hagrid trying to hide behind the curtains was providing far too much entertainment for any disquiet to set in. Hermione hit the lights and they waited in darkness.

It was only a few minutes later when they heard the guest arrive, Hermione putting the lights back on was the signal they'd been waiting for. Over a dozen people shouted 'Surprise!' at the top of their voice.

Albus and Severus stood there, undoubtedly surprised.

Hermione had expected Dumbledore, Snape was an unpleasant surprise. "Headmaster, Professor Snape, this is a private home that you have just entered uninvited and therefore illegally. Kindly leave at once."

Albus could see he'd been duped, in front of quite a few witnesses too, he attempted to make the best of it. "Miss Granger, could you please inform Mr Potter that I must speak with him."

"Harry's already spoken with you, you didn't listen then and he won't give you the opportunity to kidnap him again. You also had someone steal a letter of mine right out my hand and now you're breaking into a private home. What gives you the right to do these things headmaster?"

Severus was incensed that Potter had bested them again, now this upstart mudblood was trying to make Albus Dumbledore explain his actions. "Why you..."

He suddenly found it hard to talk though the reason why was not difficult to find. Remus had his wand pressed hard enough into the Slytherin's cheek to form an indentation.

"I have a question for you too Snivellus. How can a group of kids get from Hogwarts to London quicker than it takes you to pass on a message? Were you hoping the order would find nothing but bodies when we eventually got to the ministry? Bet you were disappointed the bodies all belonged to death eaters?"

"Remus, that is quite enough..."

Remus was just getting started. "You have no say in this old man. Don't think we didn't notice you never answered Hermione's questions either. Tonks, how to you fancy arresting two criminals on your day off? I'll bet the minister would love that."

Albus shook his head in defeat. "Very well Remus, you've made your point. I have to say I'm very disappointed in the people here..."

Minerva was barely containing her anger at this old coot's attitude, the sheer bloody arrogance of the man had her wanting to go all Hermione on him. If anyone needed a good slapping it was this wizard. "Don't you dare Albus Dumbledore, you're the one breaking the law here. I agree with Remus and vote they both get arrested. Oh, you can also take my order membership and stick it somewhere I can't say because there's students present."

Ginny was loving watching these two wizards squirm. "Oh please professor, don't let us being here stop you!"

Her father's voice reminded Ginny she was supposed to be on her best behaviour today. "This is the final straw for us too Albus, the Weasleys are also withdrawing from the order."

Hagrid growled his resignation as well before the day got even worse for Dumbledore.

Frank Longbottom spoke out. "Albus, I don't know what happened to you but this person in front of me is not the great man I remembered, respected and followed. The young people in this room now follow a new leader, Alice and I are looking forward to meeting him again. We also resign from the order."

The silence that followed was broken by Tonks. "So Hermione, do you want me to arrest them?"

"And miss Harry's party? They're not worth it Tonks. Dobby!" The elf appeared at her side. "Dobby, these two are trespassing in Harry's house and trying to spoil his birthday party."

The expression on Dobby's face was one none of the guests had ever seen a house elf use. Before Dumbledore could even raise an objection, Dobby had snapped his fingers and they were gone.

"Where did you send them Dobby?"

"Headmaster and greasy git are back at Hogwarts Miss Grangy."

Minerva was concerned. "Dobby, can elves send people through the school wards?"

"Oh no Miss Kitty, Dobby sent them near though?"

Hermione didn't like the sound of that. "Just how near is near Dobby?"

The twins were fighting to hold their laughter at the elf's Miss Kitty quote, with Dobby's next answer they lost the battle. They were not alone.

"Dobby sent them to the Black Lake Miss Grangy. Is that ok?"

"Yes Dobby, I think we can safely say that Harry would approve of that. Could you please check to see who has the tracking charm on them?"

Dobby was a happy elf, pleasing Master Harry made his day. He soon found a charm on Minerva's hat and Hagrid's waistcoat, both charms were removed.

Lavender had dressed to impress, short, tight dress, high heels, makeup and hair immaculate. Her mouth hanging open as if catching flies was kind of spoiling the effect she was aiming for. When the outburst came, it was hardly unexpected that her boyfriend was rubbing off on her. "Bloody Hell! That was incredible, is it always like this with you lot?"

Hermione smiled before answering for the group. "Yeah, pretty much. Dumbledore has had his own way for so long, he thinks that he can do whatever he likes. Snape's going to be a nightmare next term though."

McGonagall tried to offer her students some reassurance. "You leave that man to me, I'm still Deputy Headmistress. Now, where is Mr Potter?"

Hermione lifted a red plastic hula-hoop that had been sitting leaning against the wall. "We were certain Dumbledore would attempt something so we set this up as a safety measure. If everyone can touch the hoop, we can head to where the party really is."

The entire company then vanished, with only Hermione knowing they were heading for a villa in France.

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Peter was astonished, not only was he still alive, he was leading the biggest death eater raid since his master's return. The dark lord was taking no chances and he had an overwhelming force under his command. Their instructions were very simple, commit murder and sow mayhem. No one was to be left alive and nothing left standing. Peter almost pitied their targets, almost.

-oOoOo-

Once Harry got over the shock of Dumbledore's audacity (the old man had actually tried to bring Snape to his birthday party?) he was able to relax and enjoy himself. Chatting with Hagrid was something he'd been really looking forward to, leaving Hogwarts without being able to say goodbye to his first friend was something he was glad to fix. Poppy too was someone he made sure to take time with, that discussion saw both their eyes sparkling as healing was a subject now very close to both of their hearts. Harry thought that magical healing would have progressed to match the advances made on the muggle side of medicine, he was dismayed to find it hadn't. It was back to the magical community settling for what worked.

Hermione was delighted as the party appeared to be a roaring success. Dobby had the barbecue going and Winky had discovered she loved wheeling around the little hostess trolley, full of drinks. With music provided for anyone who wanted to dance and the promise of cooling off in the pool later, everyone was having a good time. She did notice her parents constantly being asked questions about Harry and having to lie. They were beginning to understand just how much Harry had trusted them. They looked almost relieved when Mr Weasley started asking them how an aireomobile actually stayed in the air.

Harry also showed his maturity when World War III threatened to break out, Molly and Winky had both made birthday cakes. Harry's quip that since Ron and Hagrid were here, they would probably need two cakes saved the day.

He was in the process of blowing out the candles on each of the cakes when he froze. "Luna, where's your dad at the moment?"

The little blond was instantly alarmed by the concern and urgency in Harry's voice. "He's at home working on some stories. Harry, you're scaring me!"

"SHIT! Mr Weasley, please tell me the Burrow's empty?"

"Yes Harry, Bill's in..."

"I'm sorry sir, both the Burrow and Luna's house are currently under attack. The wards won't hold for long and people come before buildings."

Hermione quickly had her hair in a ponytail and an arm supportively around Luna, both had their wands out and they were not alone. The commanding tone of Harry's voice left no one even considering questioning his right to lead.

"First and foremost, this is a rescue mission. Remus, Tonks, Hagrid, Ginny and Luna, you hit the house and get Mr Lovegood out of there. The rest of us will take on the death eaters until you're away." Harry grabbed a handful of cutlery, cast the portus charm and started handing them out. "These are portkeys that will bring you back here, tap them twice with your wand to activate. Professor McGonagall, you're still recovering and not long out of the hospital. Normally I would want you by our side but not today."

Harry then turned to the Longbottoms. "Exact same position for you both, not today. Everyone else, this is not a duel but a fight. They came to murder people so we will not be firing jelly-legs back at them. Reductos, slashing and piercing hexes are the curses of the day. If you can't do that, please stay here. Sorry but this means you Lavender! Poppy, Dobby and Winky will get you anything you need, please get ready for us returning."

Molly had watched as her four children instantly got ready to fight, she knew it was hopeless to object and at least she and Arthur would be there to keep an eye on them. She expressed the opinion that was held by all of them. "Harry, half my family will be in this fight and these animals are attacking our homes. I won't be holding back."

"Ok, grab the hoop and let's go. Remember, Luna's dad is the only friendly there, fire at anything and everything else. We go in three-two-one!"

Dan stood there in utter disbelief, how the hell did a birthday party become a war?

He was joined by Frank. "I said earlier the kids had a new leader to follow, I think we just got a demonstration. Neville didn't hesitate for a second, his wand was out and he was by Harry's side. I'm immensely proud of my son and bloody terrified at the same time."

Dan could only agree. "That about sums it up for me too. We've met Xeno and really like Luna but they didn't think this through, they have no idea what they're up against."

Alice and Augusta were feeling the same. "Frank, there's no way we could have stopped Neville from going. You, James and Sirius were exactly the same."

Emma was desperate not to cry, watching her daughter go off to fight a battle was not something she thought she would ever have to do. "It's not the going I'm worried about, it's the not coming back that's really got me scared."

Minerva tried to offer some encouragement, speaking with a confidence she didn't really feel. "Harry will bring them back, he wouldn't have taken them otherwise." Their eyes were drawn to the crying young lady Harry didn't take, Poppy was attempting to commandeer Lavender into helping organise some healing supplies the two elves were fetching.

"When the ministry tried to destabilise Hogwarts, he took every one of them and taught them in secret himself. That's who Harry Potter is, they would follow him anywhere and he'll bring them back."

Dan asked the question that had been troubling him. "How could Harry possibly know both houses were being attacked?"

Frank tried to answer that. "I can't be sure but he mentioned the wards, I think it would be safe to assume he has some kind of monitoring charm on them. Harry said he would protect his friends, looks as if he meant it."

The tears were threatening to fall as Emma could only agree. "Because we don't have those ward things, he had Hermione guarded around the clock. Right under the noses of the people who were watching us. I have to believe he'll look after her today."

Dan's arm slipped around her as they tried to draw comfort from each other, all they could do now was wait.

A/N Thanks for reading



## Chapter 8

Harry knew they were in trouble the instant the portkey set them down. He didn't need the intense cold or feelings of dread to know there were dementors close, they'd landed in the middle of the swarm. Prongs was soon circling the group, the stag's wide antlers violently pushing the dementors away to give them a bit of breathing room. This also lessened the dementor's effects and allowed the others to cast their own patronus charms. Harry had Godric's sword in his hand as their perilous position became clear.

The dementors had congregated at the front of the strange house while the death eaters took pot shots at the building, trying to create an entrance for the vile creatures. Luna had started running toward her home before the rest of them even got their bearings, thankfully Hagrid soon caught up with her as Remus and Tonks used their patronuses to punch a path through the dementor swarm for the rescue group.

Harry's voice rang out. "Ron, go with them. They need your patronus too! Everyone else, work in teams. One cast their patronus while the other protects from the death eaters."

They heard the crash as Hagrid hit the door at a run, it never stood a chance.

Harry found himself with Hermione and Neville, the Weasley parents and the twins making up another two teams as they took the fight to the enemy.

"Hermione, I want to see an otter, Neville you're on defence. I'm going to try something."

"Not without us you don't!" At any other time, that comment coming from Neville would have made Harry laugh, they could have a chuckle later with a few beers thrown in.

A white beam of light left Harry's hand and the nearest dementor was frozen in place, with a wild battle cry of 'Da mihi lucem' Harry charged it with his sword. It was bloody nuts, everyone was sure he was absolutely nuts, right up until the very second his sword sliced right through the dark creature.

The dementor's death scream had never been heard before and was shrill enough to curdle blood. Its cry actually halted the battle for a moment, that was until the scream was broadcast in stereo as Harry ended another one's life. Soon the battlefield was treated to the unique cries in surround sound as more and more fell to the magical sword. The death eaters tried to focus their spellfire on Harry but were then faced by a barrage of powerful and accurate spells from his two team members. They were quickly joined by four Weasleys, their patronuses no longer needed while the dementors attempted to flee for their miserable lives. The death eaters were taking casualties when Harry appeared to catch a killing curse on his magical sword and flick it back at its caster. His fellow death eaters, who were still able to portkey, were out of there before his dead body hit the ground.

Harry had practiced hour after hour, day after day with a sword, Godric had been a superb teacher. The only problem was that you couldn't build any muscle or endurance on the other side, the exercise he'd done since returning hadn't prepared him for physically battling dementors with a sword. He was knackered but, more importantly, he was enraged.

Voldemort had gone after his friends on his birthday to send out a message to Harry Potter. It was time for Harry Potter to send him one back.

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Hagrid hitting the door on the run saw that obstacle disintegrate into splinter size pieces. As he stood in the entranceway, Luna streaked past him in search of her father. Ginny and Hagrid soon followed as Remus, Tonks and Ron used their patronuses to keep the dementors at bay.

They found Xeno wedged into a corner in the kitchen, his wand by his side. It appeared as if he'd exhausted himself to the point of collapse while maintaining his patronus. He was alive though and that's all Luna was caring about. Hagrid soon had him picked up and safely cradled in his massive arms, Luna kissed her father's cheek before tapping Hagrid's spoon twice with her wand. The gentle half-giant disappeared with her father and both girls ran back to where the front door used to be.

-oOoOo-

Harry was trying to get one final push to end the battle the way he wanted. "Everyone, use your patronus, head them off then herd these bastards up. I don't want one of them getting away."

A brilliant silver-white hare patronus was racing past Harry's elbow, Luna looked like an avenging angel and more serious than anyone had ever seen her. "Hagrid got my dad safely away Harry, let's get all of them!"

With four of the rescue party now casting their patronuses too, it became a lesson in slaughter. The dementors were encircled by glowing silver - white animals that were getting closer and closer, the only break in the ever decreasing circle of pain had Harry waiting with his magical sword. Hermione and Neville were by his side in case the dementors attempted to overwhelm him as Harry culled the creatures. As the last one screamed its death song, Harry staggered away before sinking to his knees in exhaustion.

In their final moments on this earth, these disgusting creatures finally experienced the hopelessness and terror that they had inflicted on their many victims. No one really knew what a dementor's body consisted of but slicing them open provided more than screams. The stench was disgusting and they didn't bleed any type of fluid. Instead, it was a fine black powder that burst from their dying bodies, covering everything and everyone. Harry, Hermione and Neville appeared more like coalminers, miners who'd just completed an incredibly hard shift underground at the coal face, than three teens who'd been enjoying a birthday party.

Hermione had her arms around Harry, they were partially supporting each other and sharing the relief that all of them had come through this in one piece. Tonks and Remus were rounding up the downed death eaters while Molly was hugging every member of her family before checking them for injuries.

Harry was smiling at the sight of Luna and Neville holding hands. "Miss Granger, can I say you throw one hell of a birthday party. I dread to think what you'll come up with for next year."

"Well it won't be fancy dress, I think we've had quite enough of men in masks and monsters. Whatever possessed you to attack a dementor with a sword?"

"I just got mad."

"Oh I certainly considered madness as a possible answer, what was that you screamed at them?"

Harry's face was caked with the disgusting black dust, it actually cracked as he attempted to smile. "A certain gentleman whose sword I was using taught it to me, and I thought it was appropriate today. It means 'Give Light To Me' and we certainly needed all the help we could get today."

Molly's screams then alerted everyone to a problem.

She was watching the smoke rise above the trees and wailing as if being tortured. Ron and Arthur holding her by the arms were the only things stopping the Weasley matriarch running toward what must be the burning Burrow. Ron managed to activate his portkey and the three disappeared to France.

Harry was back up on his feet and dragging Hermione with him. "Your parents will go ape shit when Molly appears in that condition, I need to get you back as quick as possible. Tonks, where the hell was the ministry while we were fighting for our lives?"

"Don't know Harry but I'll be finding out. This amount of magic must have set the alarms off in the ministry. You go, Remus and me will keep an eye on things here until they finally decide to turn up."

"Fred, George, can you stay with them? First sign of trouble, use the portkeys."

Ginny, Luna and Neville joined them and the five left the carnage behind, returning to France.

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The five arrived at the villa with both Hermione and Neville being mobbed by their parents, Luna shot inside looking for her father.

Harry and Ginny pushed their way through to where an inconsolable Molly Weasley was crying her eyes out, Harry knelt in front of her.

"Listen to me Mrs Weasley, everyone's safe. We knew when we went after Luna's father that the Burrow was going to pay the price. If we had split our forces, what would have happened?"

"We could have lost people but Harry, I've lost my home..."

"It's not worth dying for! Bricks and mortar can be rebuilt, the Burrow will be rebuilt. You have my word on that."

"Harry I couldn't, we couldn't..."

"Mrs Weasley, every time I've fought, there has been at least one Weasley by my side. That is why you no longer have a home, Voldemort went after my friends to punish me. You will have a home though, just as soon as it can be built."

Molly was still crying. "It's not just a house Harry, it was our family home. All our belongings, all our mementos, my family clock!"

"The family clock may be gone but isn't it more important that everyone who had a hand on that clock's face is safe? My intention is not just to see a new house built but furnish it with everything the Weasley family needs. We'll sort something out meantime..."

It was Dan who interrupted Harry. He'd carefully watched this young man and his daughter interact with their friends all day. The affection and the respect that both were clearly held in had been admirably demonstrated when Harry informed them Luna's father needed saving. No questions were asked, no comments from his daughter about Harry's saving people thing. They just got prepared for battle and left. Now here was Harry, covered in the signs of battle from head to toe and clearly exhausted yet taking time to make an unbelievably generous offer to his friends' family who were hurting.

Dan was beginning to see the true Harry Potter and decided it was time for team Granger to help. "Harry, there's a perfectly good villa sitting down the hill. It's rented for another week and no longer being watched. After today, everyone could do with a bit of a holiday."

Arthur now tried to object this was too much but Harry waved him to silence. "That sounds fantastic Mr Granger, Dobby and Winky will take care of all of us and Molly can have a real holiday. We can go shopping first thing tomorrow for anything you need immediately."

Harry was knelling in front of Molly and now holding both her hands. "I'm quite aware the Burrow was more than a house, I understood that the moment the Weasley family invited a young orphan to share their home. When I promised Ginny that day I'd never lose touch, I said that I wanted the Potter children to play with their Weasley cousins at the Burrow. They can't do that without a Burrow, and their Gran Weasley there to look after everyone."

Harry could see he had finally gotten through to the woman, Molly's greatest wish was to have some youngsters calling her gran. "Just remember when designing the new kitchen to make it bigger, we all intend to fill it."

Ginny's snigger turned Molly onto a different subject and gave more than one person the opportunity to wipe unseen tears from their eyes. "I think someone's going for an early start."

Molly followed where Ginny was looking and saw the previously perfectly coiffured Miss Brown, now with tear tracks down her cheeks and wrapped around her battle blackened youngest son. Lavender apparently wasn't caring too much about her appearance at the moment, her boyfriend certainly wasn't complaining!

"Ronald Bilius Weasley, put her down at once!"

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Draco was ecstatic, what a summer he was having. The dark lord was now staying at his home and Draco proudly sported his master's mark on his forearm. After witnessing just who the dark lord had working for him, Draco was confident he'd soon be rising to the top of the death eater organisation. He'd just taken part in his first raid and it was against the Weasleys. They weren't home but there was still the pleasure of burning their hovel down to the ground, who said shit didn't burn?

Draco was chortling away at his own wit when the portkey returned them to the dark lord's presence, the laughter died in his throat. A

seriously angry dark lord was no laughing matter. It would appear only three death eaters had returned from the raid on the loony's house, those three were probably now wishing they'd stayed and taken their chances.

As Draco watched the trio writhe in agony from the cruciatus, he also noticed the blood dripping from underneath the dark lord's wound dressing. Even Crabbe and Goyle weren't stupid enough to mention this, though the master's continual use of the name Potter had them all wondering just what the hell was going on.

Draco had joined the death eaters with visions of power and glory clouding his sight. Those clouds were being blown away by his first look at the other side of the coin. Draco hadn't quite figured out yet that Voldemort didn't share power or glory with anyone. When the dark lord tossed a coin in the air, it was always a case of heads he wins, tails you lose.

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Tonks had the four death eaters who still drew breath stabilised, stunned and restrained. Two of them had lost limbs but she had managed to cauterise the stumps to stop them bleeding to death.

Remus had transfigured sheets to cover the three who were dead. Not from any sense of preserving their decency, more for the sake of the twins who kept glancing in their direction.

It seemed like an age before pops of apparition announced the arrival of the ministry. A group of six aurors, led by John Dawlish, appeared in the centre of the battlefield. They all stood in wonder at the carnage that now surrounded them.

"Oh look George, the aurors finally decided to show up, and here was us thinking they would need the knight bus to direct them to a fight."

"Naw Fred, they're probably too scared to get on the Knight bus."

"They don't pay aurors enough to get on the knight bus! Knock it off you two, we've a party to get back to."

"Sorry Tonks, we don't include you in that."

"Yeah, you were here for the fight again, this lot can't even make it on time when the battle's in their own ministry. Harry had to do their job for them again."

John wasn't about to take this from a couple of kids. "Alright you two, that's quite enough. Otherwise, we have a nice cell in the ministry that could easily have your names on it."

John had misread the situation though, the twins weren't for backing down.

"Oh we're so scared!"

"Yeah, there's only six of you."

"We just took on a dozen or so death eaters."

"Not to mention a horde of dementors."

"While you lot were probably finishing your coffee break."

"Forgive us if we don't all bow before the mighty aurors of the ministry."

Remus soon had a hand on each of their shoulders. "Cool it guys, it's just the adrenalin comedown of your first encounter with death eaters. You two were at the sharp end of the biggest magical battle fought on British soil in well over a decade. You guys were brilliant and I'm proud to have fought alongside you."

"Yeah, we helped save a man's life."

"While our home was being burned to the ground."

Fred was really starting to lose it. "Where the fuck were you guys? I think that's a valid question and I think we deserve an answer!" He then lost the wonderful cheeseburger that Dobby had made him, it didn't taste anywhere near as good the second time around.

George stood over his brother, wand in hand and practically daring the aurors to snigger or make a comment. None did. "If you'd been here in time then perhaps Fred here wouldn't have had to blow the



head off the bastard who had our mother in his sights, the body's over there under a sheet."

Of the six aurors present, three of them had never fired their wands in anger while none of them had killed anyone in the line of duty. They at least now understood what they were dealing with. These two young men had fought in what must have been, judging from the carnage, a horrific battle. John decided to cut them some slack.

"The sensors inside the ministry were down for maintenance. Now you can call me suspicious but that's one hell of a coincidence, there will be a full investigation the moment we return." One of the aurors who'd been examining the bodies and prisoners spoke quietly to Dawlish, John then turned back to face the four. "One of the bodies died from the killing curse, can you tell me how that happened?"

George answered first. "It was his own curse that killed him."

Fred had recovered enough to take part in the conversation. "Yeah, stupid bastard fired avada kedavra at Hermione."

"Harry moved like lightning and caught the curse on his sword, one flick of his wrist and it went straight back to the death eater."

"That's impossible!"

Fred shook his head, "So is killing a dementor, didn't stop Harry though."

"Weren't you the one's saying it was impossible for Voldemort to have returned?"

"It would appear to us that the ministry needs a whole new definition of impossible."

George decided to help them with that. "Here's your first clue, if it involves Harry Potter then anything is possible."

John looked toward Tonks for the truth, she gave him a quick summery. "A group of us portkeyed into the middle of this, Xeno Lovegood was trapped inside the house. Remus and I were part of the rescue party while the twins were part of the group out here, keeping the death eaters and dementors off our backs. We got Xeno

safely away and then assisted the other group. I have no idea how many dementors were actually here but I personally saw Harry Potter take down over thirty of them with his sword. I think it should be obvious to everyone here that we need to get these two to our healer, we've all had quite the day."

As if waiting on his cue, Albus Dumbledore apparated in and immediately attempted to take command. "What has happened here?"

"Oh look Fred, someone else turns up when the fighting's over."

"Yeah, maybe if you'd have gotten here earlier, you wouldn't have needed to ask that question."

Albus was experienced with battles and recognised at once what the problem was with the usually jovial twins. He instinctively went into concerned grandfather mode. "I'm sorry for what you boys must have seen and had to do here today, war is indeed a terrible thing. This is why Harry needs my help. He's far too young and inexperienced to cope with all this on his own. Surely now you can see this?"

George was thoughtful for a moment. "Yes, I can certainly see your point."

Albus was delighted that he was finally making some progress, here was the first crack in the Potter camp armour. His illusions were soon shattered though as George continued.

"The glaring problem though, like today for example, is that you never get there in time to be of any help.

Fred was, as usual, in complete agreement with his twin, he held up his fingers and started counting down how many times Dumbledore had let Harry down. "You weren't there in first year when Ron got injured stopping Voldemort."

George kept it going but allowed Fred to keep count. "That summer, it was us who had to pull the bars off his window and get him away from those muggles."

"You weren't there when Harry had to save Ginny in the chamber of secrets."

"You weren't there when the dementors tried to kill him in Hogwarts."

"You weren't there when Voldemort tried to kill him in the graveyard."

"You weren't there when Umbridge tortured him all year in your bloody school!"

"You weren't here today while we all fought for our lives."

"Even though it was you who put the wards on the Burrow, you still didn't get here in time to do any bloody good. You were probably too busy holding Snape's hand and listening to him bleat on about how Potter had beaten him again and it wasn't fair!"

Fred held up seven fingers to Dumbledore. "Are you seeing a pattern here Headmaster? Is it any wonder Harry doesn't want anything to do with you? You may talk the talk but Harry Potter is the one who gets the business done."

"Do you have an answer for those allegations headmaster?" Rita Skeeter seemed to have come from nowhere, her quill fairly flying over the parchment.

Tonks took charge. "Ok people, time to get back to the party. The vultures have arrived."

Rita's voice was sickly sweet as she ignored that barb. "Auror Tonks is it? Could I just clarify a few things about your statement?"

"For a start, I'm no longer an auror. My resignation was sent in this morning." Tonks sent a knowing smile to Albus as she said this.

This caught everyone by surprise so Remus explained. "I asked the beautiful Miss Tonks to marry me, she said yes. As the ministry classes me as a dark creature, no member of my family may work in or for the ministry of magic. She resigned before they fired her. A nice footnote for you Rita is that Albus Dumbledore was the Chief Warlock the day that legislation was passed."

Tonks nodded in agreement. "I think we'll take a leaf out of Harry's book and live in the muggle world. Do you know they have laws specifically against discrimination?"

With that parting comment, they activated their portkeys and left Rita stalking Dumbledore like a lioness after a wounded wildebeest.

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Ron had finally found something he liked about the muggle world. Holding the bottle up to show his appreciation, Ron shouted over to his mate. "Hey Harry, this Stella bird certainly knows how to make beer. This stuff is brilliant."

This generated a lot of laughter amongst the group. Not everyone got the joke but when you've got a few beers inside you, anything can seem funny.

Dobby and Winky had done wonders, resizing a selection of clothes to fit everyone. Arthur Weasley in a Hawaiian type shirt had a happy smile on his face, that smile might have had something to do with the amount of brandy he had drunk. The fact he'd been the only one with anything more serious than a cut or bruise also helped his good mood, four of his children and his wife were in that battle. That Harry had completely healed the slash on his shoulder just added to the very pleasant mix of emotions.

Most of the experienced witches and wizards knew they'd been incredibly lucky today. The death eaters hadn't been that good and were certainly not expecting any resistance or the arrival of company. They were relying totally on the dementors quashing any and all resistance, treating the entire attack as nothing more than a bit of fun. They had been standing about in groups, berating the last person who'd cast a spell at the house for missing. The curses were flying at them before they even realised what was happening. When Harry took on the dementors, they had no plan B other than to run away when the going got too tough.

Showered and changed, the entire mood of the birthday party had shifted. It became more a celebration of them still being here and able to actually celebrate at all. Harry had asked the assembled parents if they could have a few beers. Since they'd fought a battle today, none of the parents thought this would do the slightest bit of

harm. If the kids wanted to let off some steam, it was better to do it where they could be kept an eye on.

After being fed, they were now all sitting outside on couches. Drinking a cold beer with their friends and watching the sun go down.

Luna was sitting snuggled into Neville, her father had been given a dreamless sleep potion and was expected to make a full recovery in a matter of days. Both would be staying with Harry and Hermione in their villa for at least that time. The little blond drank one beer before appearing to fall asleep cuddling into Neville. They weren't sure if she was really sleeping but Neville wasn't complaining and she looked far too comfortable and content to move.

Tonks and Remus meanwhile were sitting together, quietly celebrating their engagement with a bottle of French champagne. Remus had taken enough jibes about when they would be setting the date and the couple were now just enjoying the company, and the excellent bubbly.

Bubbly was not a word that could be used to describe the twins, by their standards they could even be considered morose. Harry was sure he knew how to cheer them up.

"How's Weasley' Wizard Wheezes coming along guys?"

Fred couldn't keep the disappointment out his voice as he answered. "It was doing great Harry, but we just lost all our stock."

George was trying to keep their spirits up. "Thankfully we don't keep our notes in the house, can't risk mum finding them."

The attempted joke was rather forced and fell flat as it reminded everyone of just what they'd lost. Harry was sure he could lift their spirits. "So, if you were to have your stock replenished and acquire premises, how long would it be before you were open to the public?"

Both twins eyed him suspiciously. "Just what are you up to Harry? That's hardly likely to happen."

"Oh I was just thinking that if your silent partner came out into the open and wanted to further invest in your business, we could maybe do some dealing here. Would a shop in Diagon Alley that has a two

bedroom flat above it and a workroom out back be something you'd be interested in? Do you think there would be any chance of getting that open before Christmas?"

"We would be open before Halloween."

Fred agreed with his twin's quick assessment but added a bit of his own. "We might even have some products ready for Hogwarts starting."

Harry couldn't contain his smile as he watched the change in his two friends. "Just as well I took a lease out on that shop then."

Both twins were now on their feet, eyes glowing with hope. "Are you serious Harry?"

"No Fred, that was my godfather!"

This saw a collective holding of breath until Fred laughed and dragged Harry to his feet, he and George then proceeded to dance around him like a couple of madmen. "Ok Harry, we're in! What's it to be, equal thirds?"

"Sorry guys, the figure I've got in mind is twenty two percent. For this I'll front the money to get WWW started and pay the lease for the first five years. Buying supplies, fitting out the shop, workroom, flat and advertising all come under the heading of WWW business. I also realise you might need to hire some staff to meet your opening deadlines, I will personally recommend some Gryffindors and at least one Ravenclaw for summer jobs."

Hands were shaken as the deal was done.

The excitement was spreading around everyone and even Molly couldn't keep it out of her voice. "Harry Potter, I don't know whether to hug you or box your ears in for encouraging them with this nonsense."

The twins were now fired up, there were things to do and plans to be made. They couldn't pass up an opportunity like this though.

Fred was first with the quip. "Well mum, I think you should box his ears in."

George was ready with the punchline. "Yeah, that will do a lot less damage than one of your hugs."

Anyone who'd witnessed or experienced one of Molly's hugs just had to laugh at that.

Ron was sitting with Lavender on one arm, a bottle of beer in his other hand and now the prospect of a summer job to get some gold of his own. "This is brilliant mate, I knew you couldn't leave magic behind." The silence that greeted that comment told Ron he'd said the wrong thing.

"Ron, I haven't changed my mind. I still intend to live my life in the muggle world."

Beer and Ron's Weasley temper were not a good mix. "Why the hell would you want to do that? What's that world got that magic can't provide? You sit there making plans that you have no intention of carrying out. Voldemort came after your friends today, is that ok with you?"

Arthur had the beer bottle out his son's hand and was just about to give the ungrateful pig a piece of his mind when Harry asked him not to.

"Mr Weasley, please let me try and answer Ron's questions before you say anything to him."

Arthur decided it would probably be better if he took a few moments to gather his thoughts before confronting his youngest son so agreed.

Harry sat back down and had his arm around Hermione before continuing. "Ron, you're sitting in a muggle house, wearing muggle clothes, drinking muggle beer and eating muggle food. What's so wrong about that? This world has much to offer and what I crave most is anonymity. Here, I'm Harry Potter and they've never heard of the boy-who-lived. Has anyone ever sat down and figured out what else happened that night? I lost both my parents and every time they use that stupid name it's a reminder that they died and I didn't." A comforting kiss on the cheek from Hermione kept his temper in check, now was not the time to lose it.

"Yes we sat and made some plans here today, I intend to play my part in every one of them. The lease for the twins' new shop is already in my room, I had intended to speak with them about that today before the party was interrupted."

Harry waved his hand and a necklace similar to Luna's butterbeer corks appeared around his neck. "I copied this idea from my friend, each one of these pieces of wood came from a property I'm monitoring and alerts me if the wards are under threat. This one's the Burrow, that's Luna's and this is Neville's. As Hermione's home didn't have wards, I had her watched from the moment she left the burrow. I know all of you are targeted because you're my friends, I promise you I will be there if trouble shows its face."

A wave of his hand and the necklace was once more invisible. "This is the so-called muggle world Ron and we were all having a good time today before Voldemort decided to intervene. We took care of that problem the best we could and now I'll take care of Voldemort. It doesn't change my plans though, I still intend to continue my education and ultimately work in the muggle world. That doesn't prevent us from having days like this at any of our homes, though I could well do without the dementors trying to give me a birthday kiss."

Arthur was in total agreement with everything Harry had just said, he really couldn't see his youngest son's problem here. "There are a lot fewer dementors now, thanks to you Harry. How many do you think were there today?"

Hermione had been sitting quietly, content to let Harry deal with the problem while she snuggled into his side. She had the answer for this question though. "Eighty seven."

All eyes were now firmly fixed on the couple. No one doubted the accuracy of that number, that Harry had managed the task at all still staggered the witches and wizards present. To the magical community, dementors had been the living embodiment of the bogymen. To hear that number had been wiped out was incredible. Hermione was beginning to think her word was being questioned until Harry returned her comforting kiss on the cheek.



"Only my Hermione could be firing cursed at death eaters, using her patronus to keep those things off me and still be keeping a running total in her head. Beautiful, brilliant and so brave."

Harry was becoming lost in those wonderful brown eyes until his girlfriend's mother interrupted. "I'm taking it from everyone's reactions that eighty seven is quite a high number?"

Minerva attempted to explain their collective shock. "Until today Emma, the general opinion was that these monsters couldn't be killed. Seven dead would have been an unbelievable number but eighty seven must account for about half their population, assuming that the rest visited the burrow. I don't think I would be alone here in saying I feared them more than I did the death eaters. Harry has taken away one of Voldemort's most terrifying weapons."

Minerva's statement was met with total agreement and more than a few shudders.

Remus had a question though that he was dying to know the answer to. "Harry, how are you going to deal with Voldemort while living as a muggle?"

Harry's smile put the fear of god into Remus, he instantly promised himself never to do anything that would see Harry smile like that about him.

"It's actually quite simple Remus, I'm going to take Voldemort's most powerful weapon away, before turning that very same weapon against him. Voldemort has people so afraid of him, they wouldn't even say his name out loud when they thought he was dead. I intend to remove that fear by telling everyone about the creature they're so afraid of. That he's not a lord, his name is nothing more than an anagram thought up by a teenage boy called Tom. How his father was a muggle, the number of purebloods he's murdered to achieve his goals. People are afraid of things they don't understand so phase one will be to strip away that fear. Kill the myth before taking care of the monster."

McGonagall was having difficulty equating this young man with the lad she'd taught for the last five years. "Phase one Harry? Where is all this planning coming from and why haven't I seen it in my class?"

"Well Professor, I got me this brilliant girlfriend and had to smarten up my act. Phase two I'm going to need some help with. Mr Weasley, do you think the minister would entertain the idea of offering a full pardon to whoever killed Voldemort?"

The change of direction caught everyone on the hop, Arthur answered as best he could. "Harry, I think Fudge would offer anything to see the end of Voldemort. Of course, claiming as much of the credit as possible for himself. Do you think your revelations will be so shocking that his own people would kill him?"

"No sir, but I believe the five hundred thousand galleon price tag I intend to put on his head will!"

Hermione had more information than anyone else there and had Harry wrapped in her arms within seconds. "That is utterly brilliant Harry. Voldemort could still be said to die by your hand yet you don't have to face him. Thank you, thank you thank you..."

Each of the 'thanks' was punctuated with a kiss that had both Grangers smiling in relief. Hermione was relieved that Harry wasn't going to have to face Voldemort, they were delighted beyond words their daughter would no longer have to be beside him when he did. Today had proved beyond doubt to the Granger parents that Hermione would follow Harry anywhere.

It took a moment for Harry to be able to answer his girlfriend, which drew a few sniggers. "That's my plan Hermione, he's a mad dog that deserves nothing better than to be murdered in his sleep or poisoned at dinner. He trusts no one at the moment, this will increase that fear a hundred fold. Even Wormtail might be tempted to take a pop at his master for an amnesty and half a million galleons."

Remus was incensed with that suggestion. "You'd let that rat go free?"

"To see Voldemort dead? Yes."

Remus was about to say a lot more when he noticed that Harry had that smile on his lips again, his intended protest died in his throat.

"Just because he gets an official pardon doesn't mean I couldn't introduce the rat to Crookshanks, Hedwig or Puck. The ministry might pardon him but I never will."

Oh Remus just loved that. It not only appealed to his sense of justice but his marauder side too. Knowing just who Puck was guaranteed Peter wouldn't escape again and Harry was too smart to be caught.

Ron still wasn't satisfied though and felt his original questions were being ignored. "So this is it Harry, we'll get to see you once a summer and perhaps at Christmas?"

Harry squeezed Hermione to restrain her from ripping the redhead to pieces. "Ron, it takes two to make a friendship work. Hogsmead is not the only place that offers a few shops or places to eat. We could easily spend those days in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen. Spending the day shopping in a muggle city instead of a magical village might make a pleasant change."

Ron attempted to get to his feet but Lavender stopped him. Harry still wasn't getting his point. "Here's the thing Harry, I'm not ashamed of being magical. I actually want to spend the day in Hogsmead, its part of growing up. It's who I am."

There was silence as Harry thought carefully before answering. "You're spot on Ron, I have no right to ask you to change. Here's the problem though, I can't walk about in the magical community and you're not prepared to try the muggle one. Where does that leave us?"

Ron had been expecting an argument, Harry's agreement and return question totally threw him, time to fall back to old faithful. It was pick on Hermione time. "Why are you asking me? I'm not the one who's changing everything. Hermione is the one who has all the answers here, how is she going to handle having a boyfriend that's determined to be a muggle?"

Hermione's first reaction was to let rip at Ron but she had just witnessed how effective Harry's tactics had been, she was also in no mood to argue with this prat tonight. "I love Harry and want to be with him, whether that's in this world or the magical one doesn't really matter to me. Harry wants to go to university and study for a career, something I can fully understand. That would have been my

own path of choice had Professor McGonagall not paid me a visit with a certain letter. I will be returning to Hogwarts and I certainly intend to sit my NEWTs. What I do after that is something that will be discussed between me, Harry and my parents. I understand Harry's reasons for leaving the magical world and support him one hundred percent."

Hermione couldn't resist returning Ron's continual 'muggle' jibes with interest. "You appear to be resigned to losing your best friend but answer me this, what would have happened today if you hadn't been at Harry's muggle birthday party?"

Assuming Minerva was correct and they'd sent at least an equal force to the Burrow, only one outcome would have been possible. Everyone knew the Burrow would have been overwhelmed and the Weasleys would all be dead.

Arthur could see Ron getting ready to blast back and chose this moment to intervene. His son would have to understand that Hermione was now Harry's girlfriend, making her cry could have a very different result than the one Ron was used to. "I think that's quite enough discussion for now. This can be continued tomorrow when tempers have cooled and the beer's worn off. Harry, happy birthday and thanks for the hospitality."

Harry made a portkey to take the Weasleys to the other villa, Dan had already provided them with the keys and Winky would see them settled in. Ron was now too busy kissing Lavender goodnight to worry about arguing with anyone. The Weasleys had no sooner left when Neville was also kissing a sleepy Luna goodnight. Everyone else was heading back to the Longbottoms' home, they could then floo to their final destination from there.

Neville shook Harry's hand before he left. "Harry, Luna and I would certainly love spending time in a muggle city with you and Hermione. There are only so many times you can go to Honeydukes and the Three Broomsticks, a change would be great."

"Thanks for that Nev, we appreciate that and we'll get it organised before the first Hogsmead trip. You do know that portkey I gave you earlier will still work tomorrow? You're welcome here anytime you want to visit Luna."

This received a wide smile from the new couple and a pout from Lavender. Harry didn't care if she and Ron were upset by this decision. There was no way Harry was trusting Lavender Brown with a portkey to where he was living. If she spouted all she knew, Dumbledore would be able to find the Weasleys. All everyone else knew was that Harry and the Grangers were in France, they hadn't told anyone that the other villa could be seen from here. That France was over twice the size of Great Britain and this villa was rented in the name of James should help keep them safe.

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Luna entered the bedroom she was going to be sharing with Hermione, leaving the young couple outside the door to say goodnight in private.

"Not exactly the birthday party I had imagined for you Harry."

"You being there was enough for me Hermione." This was followed by a kiss that curled her toes.

"Wow, so smooth Mr Potter, I nearly forgot what I wanted to ask you. I wondered why you asked the twins for twenty two percent? I know it would probably cost them a lot more elsewhere but it seems so unlike you."

"I have no intention of keeping it, my plan was to give Ron and Ginny ten percent each when they leave Hogwarts. If the twins business takes off like I think it will, they'll be set for life. It will also give them a job if they can't find anything else. My two percent will do quite nicely. It may take years to get my initial outlay back but that's not the important thing here."

It was now time for Hermione to curl Harry's toes with a kiss. "You sir, are something else! I think we're going to lose Ron as a friend though. You and I want to change the world, Ron wants the world to stop and everything around him to stay the exact same. He's digging his heels in and we can't meet him halfway on this one. You walking down Diagon Alley would start a riot."

Harry could see what Hermione was saying but had a different opinion. "Give him time love, Ginny and the twins will be working on him. You didn't see Lavender's eyes when I mentioned shopping in

a muggle city. I've a feeling that whatever Lavender wants, Lavender has ways of getting. One visit to a mall for Lavender and Ron's objections will soon be dealt with."

Hermione's giggles told Harry she now agreed with him.

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A clearly nervous Dan was waiting for Harry outside his bedroom door. "Harry, can I have a quick word with you?"

Harry choked down any smart answers and invited Dan inside, they sat on the two chairs facing each other. He was curious to know what this was about.

Dan decided the best way forward was just to blurt it out. "Harry, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for keeping Hermione safe today. I would also like to apologise for the way I've treated you since we met..."

Harry interrupted the man before he could say any more. "I'm sorry Mr Granger, I can't accept your apology nor your thanks. Today, Hermione was the one who kept me safe as I went after the dementors. She really is a powerful and capable witch in her own right. As to the apology, I don't think you've done anything that warrants offering one. You did what you thought was needed to keep Hermione safe, something we both agree is our top priority. I have no problem with that at all."

Dan was looking at him strangely. "Just what age are you Harry?"

Harry actually laughed at that. "I'll need to speak with Winky on cutting back with dispensing the brandy, today was my sixteenth birthday. Yes, I spent a number of 'other' years in the company of nothing but adults and Sirius but I am only sixteen."

Dan was shaking his head. "Sometimes I wonder Harry, I still feel badly for the way I treated you."

"Mr Granger, as I said to Hermione, any boy coming sniffing around our nearly seventeen year old daughter is going to experience a lot more grief than I did. You have my word on it sir."

The serious expression on Harry's face told Dan the young man not only understood, he wasn't joking about planning to do the exact same himself. "Well you can be sure her grandfather will be getting a few shots in at this punk as well. I feel so much better Harry but there is one thing still worrying me, do you think Hermione will be safe going back to Hogwarts?"

"Well, I actually need you and Mrs Granger's help for this one."

"Anything Harry, what do you need son?"

"I need you both to look after Crookshanks."

Dan was beginning to think Harry was right and he had too much brandy until it was explained to him. "Hogwarts students are only allowed one pet. There's no way Hermione is setting foot inside that castle without Puck."

Dan was now the proud owner of a wide smile. "That's bloody brilliant, her mother and I will feel a lot better knowing you will be there." Dan stuck his hand out. "Happy sixteenth birthday Harry, and please call me Dan."

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 9

Xeno was still confined to bed but had managed some breakfast. He'd thanked Harry profusely, claiming it was only knowing Luna was safe at Harry's birthday party that had allowed him to maintain his patronus for so long. The Quibbler editor had felt the massive debilitating presence of the dementor hoard and figured it wouldn't be long before the aurors showed up to rescue him. An attack of that magnitude couldn't go unnoticed for long. Discovering that the ministry wouldn't have gotten there in time just increased Xeno's gratitude to his rescuers.

The party of five were then busy making plans for the day when Neville arrived. He appeared very nervous and had a copy of the Prophet under his arm.

"Morning everyone, you might want to take a look at this? The magical community back home is going absolutely nuts over it."

Neville sat down the paper and they all crowded around the publication, Emma immediately let out a scream.

Dan was shocked as well but managed to control it slightly better. "Shit! You killed eighty-seven of those things? No wonder everyone struggled to believe it last night, that thing looks like something straight out of your worst nightmare."

The Grangers had both seen magical newspapers before but nothing could have prepared them for this. There, in a picture that covered half the front page, was their daughter, Harry and Neville. That Harry was facing the most horrific thing either of the Grangers had ever seen was only partially responsible for Emma's involuntary outburst. Either side of Harry stood Neville and their daughter, both firing off curse after curse to keep the death eaters at bay while Harry cut the monster down to size with his sword. The picture played in a loop that lasted about ten seconds and was simply mesmerising. The bold headline above it removed any doubt as to what was happening here.

### Defecting Dementors Destroyed

If Oz had newspapers, both Granger parents reckoned that headline would be comparable to announcing the wicked witch was dead. As



if that wasn't enough, there was another attention grabbing headline below the picture.

Harry Potter wields sword as ministry six thwart you-know-who again

Rita then proceeded to describe the battle's events accurately, including the heroic rescue of Xeno Lovegood, and name everyone involved. The effective journalism didn't end there though, Rita was just getting warmed up. The related articles would see certain ministry personnel fearing for their livelihood and Dumbledore reaching for the headache potion as the Prophet demanded certain questions be answered to the public's satisfaction.

Why would creatures supposedly under ministry control begin attacking wizarding dwellings?

Just who scheduled maintenance on the ministry's sensors while massive attacks were taking place against the homes of two old pureblood families?

How could someone who had taught their children at Hogwarts, and fought against the death eater threat in two wars, be classified by our ministry as a dark creature?

Why should a very talented young auror, the only auror to take part in the battle at the ministry and fight against the attacks yesterday, be forced to resign from her job because she's marrying the above wizard?

What is our ministry doing so badly that this skilled witch and wizard now appear ready to join Harry Potter in his proposed move to the muggle world?

Dumbledore actually got an article all to himself. Rita reported she had it on 'good authority' the headmaster and Professor Snape had attempted to breach the security surrounding Harry Potter's sixteenth birthday party. The Prophet reporter couldn't help but take great delight in pointing out that their attempt was easily thwarted. A birthday party that Harry and his guests then left to rescue his friend's father.

Rita then had what amounted to a list of allegations for Dumbledore to answer. She also demanded the wizarding public be told what part the old wizard played in Harry Potter's decision to leave them in their time of need.

Harry couldn't help but be impressed. "Wow, Rita really came through for us this time, she must have been there for most of the battle. Luna, I was intending to give your dad the story on Voldemort but I think Rita's just earned herself another exclusive interview. My instincts are telling me to strike while the iron is hot."

"Harry, that's fine with me. Dad's not going to be fit for at least a few days, then we'll need to check the house for damage. The printing press might need repaired too. Just don't leave your date to meet Rita this time."

Hermione was actually blushing before glancing at her parents to see if that comment caused any problems. She needn't have worried, they were still staring at the picture in disbelief.

Dan was so glad he'd made his peace with Harry last night, he would hate to think that his decision was influenced in any way by the sword wielding version in this picture. Quite frankly, that image of Harry attacking that creature frightened the life out of him.

The mild mannered Neville Longbottom that Dan knew also bore no relationship to the young man in the picture. By far the biggest shock though was the image of his daughter. Hermione resembled some wand-wielding warrior princess, fighting like a demon to protect her prince. Any residual thoughts Dan had about Hermione still being his little girl were blown away once and for all. Harry had told Dan that Hermione was a capable witch in her own right, here was his proof. He tried not to think about those creatures Harry was attacking with his magical sword, they really were something out of a horror writer's imagination.

Emma was struggling to regain control of herself, her voice was trembling as she spoke. "Oh Hermione, I should have known anything that could frighten Minerva McGonagall must be bad. How could you stand there and fight like that?"

"Mum, there were more of those things attacked us two years ago at Hogwarts and Harry chased them away by himself. He's since

taught us the specific spell to fight them and there were a lot more of us this time. I also had a return portkey and my necklace to help protect me."

Neville was bursting to say something. "Harry, our floo has been going nuts all morning. The press, half the ministry and Dumbledore to name just a few. They all want to talk to me, the attacks and Rita's article have set the entire country alight. Can I stay here too?"

Harry began to laugh before noticing that Neville wasn't joking. His friend was very much of the same ilk as himself and would hate all the attention. "Nev, if it's that bad you'd be very welcome. We'd need to check with your mum and dad though."

They were interrupted by Winky. "Master Harry, the Weasleys are wanting to meet with you."

"Ok Winky, tell them the portkey they used last night will bring them back here." The little elf was off before Harry got a chance to ask if the Weasleys had seen today's newspaper. This villa was currently only accessible to Hedwig but the one rented by the Grangers had no such enchantments.

When they arrived and Arthur was clutching the paper, it was safe to assume the delivery owl had found them. It was also obvious that something was bothering Ron, Harry ignored that for the moment. "Morning all, how was the villa last night?"

Ginny couldn't contain her excitement. "Oh it was wonderful Harry. Did you know my room had its own toilet and shower? No queuing."

Having both stayed at the Burrow, Harry and Hermione knew exactly where Ginny was coming from with her comment. "Have that designed into the new Burrow, it makes all the difference when getting ready in the morning. I'm assuming you've all seen today's Prophet?"

This triggered whatever was obviously eating Ron, he came right back at Harry with a question of his own. "Just why did you send me with the rescue party Harry?"

Hermione spotted the problem at once but Harry just answered truthfully, he had no ulterior motives to hide. "I didn't take dementors

into account when I made up the teams. Hagrid can't cast a patronus and Ginny's isn't corporal yet, Luna would be far too worried about her father to generate any happy thoughts. That left only Remus and Tonks to defend the group, with the large number of dementors present I didn't think that was enough."

Everyone accepted that perfectly reasonable explanation but Ron had another question. "Why didn't you send Neville?"

Harry was becoming exasperated by this accusatory line of questioning but again answered truthfully. "Neville's just gotten a new wand, yesterday was probably the first time he used it to cast a spell. What's your problem Ron? Was I really supposed to trust the entire mission on an untested wand?"

Hermione was now livid but Luna actually beat her to the punch, she didn't pull any punches either. "It's quite simple Harry, Ronald here wants his picture in the newspaper more than he wanted to save my dad."

Ron was about to come back with a biting retort when Neville's arm went protectively around the little blonde's waist. Neville's return glare at Ron spoke volumes about what would happen if the redhead tried to pull the same shit he did with Hermione on Luna.

The boy facing Ron appeared to have undergone almost as much of a transformation as Harry. A large infusion of confidence and self-belief, added to his parents being healed saw Neville Longbottom standing proud.

"Ron, Harry was in charge. He says do something, that's the end of it. If you have a problem with that then next time you can stay behind and keep Lavender company."

"So we're not allowed to ask questions now?"

Neville came right back at him. "Now is fine, in the middle of a fight, no. You could get one of us killed. This isn't a game Ron, the death eaters thought they were out for a stroll in the park yesterday and look what happened to them. They were trying to murder Luna's father and every one of us played our part in his rescue, that's why we went. We had no idea Rita was there, she must have been hidden from the very start. Only an utter arsehole like Lockhart

would stop in the middle of a fight to pose for a picture. Are we going to see our Gryffindor dorm full of hair care products next term?"

This cracked the twins up.

"Ron use hair care products?"

"He's only recently started using soap."

Ginny helped her brother out. "Lockhart wouldn't get near enough a fight to pose, I'd rather have Ron at my back any day."

Harry agreed with her. "So would I Ginny. Sorry Ron, in the same situation I would make the same decision. I needed someone to cover their backs, that someone was you."

Ron was somewhat satisfied with that but his attention turned to another matter. "How did Neville get here anyway?"

Harry had known for certain this one was coming so proceeded to knock it on the head immediately. "I gave Neville a portkey and no, Lavender can't have one. Nothing against Lavender, I just have no intention of providing her with access to where I'm staying at the moment. I might as well take out an advert in Teen Witch Weekly."

Much to Ron's chagrin, the twins found this hilarious.

"Do you honestly think that picture won't be all over Teen Witch Weekly?"

"Even without Lavender's input, they're going to be hounding you."

"Ginny's been drooling over that picture all morning."

"You can bet all the other witches in Britain will be doing the same, why do you think Ron's so upset?"

Both Fred and George thought the groups' reactions to this revelation were just too funny. When Neville nervously confessed that Teen Witch Weekly had already attempted to contact him, the twins were in stitches of laughter.

Luna leaned into Neville, offering and receiving support. "I'm just glad Neville asked me to be his girlfriend yesterday. I agree with Ginny, both Neville and Harry look incredibly hot in that picture."

Dan was a bit perturbed by this conversation. "My daughter is actually in that picture too you know."

Fred looked at the dentist incredulously, "We know Hermione is in that picture, but it would be a brave wizard who would say how amazingly sexy she looked in that image."

George was nodding in total agreement. "Have you met her boyfriend? The delectable Miss Granger is genuinely scary in her own right but her boyfriend terrifies the life out of us."

"Voldemort merely threatened her, Harry put him down."

"That death eater who fired the killing curse at her won't make that mistake again."

"He won't make any mistakes again. Coolest and scariest thing I ever saw."

"So sorry Mr Granger, forgive us if we don't drool over your daughter."

"Yeah, we want Harry as our business partner, never as an enemy."

Hermione now had her hands on her hips. "I am standing right here people."

It was Harry's turn to slip his arm around his girlfriend's waist. "I think you look hot enough to scorch the page Hermione, but then I always think that."

Ron started to giggle and took a moment to explain what he found so funny. "Can you imagine Malfoy's face when he see's that? He'll also need to wait until visiting day at Azkaban to tell his father."

This was a happy thought for all the younger members but they had a lot to do today, Harry got the ball rolling. "Mr and Mrs Weasley, I have arranged a vault to cover all the expenses with building and refitting a new Burrow. My original thought that we could shop in

France for your immediate needs is probably wrong. You'll want to get back to Britain and begin organising your new home as soon as possible. I can make you a portkey between your villa and Diagon Alley, will that do?"

Molly hadn't said a word all morning, she still didn't. Harry was just engulfed in the Weasley matriarch's arms. It was left to her husband to verbalise their thanks. "Harry, that would be fantastic. We couldn't ask for anything more."

Dobby appeared with a little box for Harry, he passed it over to the twins. "Guys, this is yours. The lease and keys for the shop, also a Gringotts business vault key. You can take the same portkey, I've never actually seen the shop. Dobby handles all my business with Gringotts now."

The little elf appeared to grow a few inches with pride before popping away.

Fred took the box from Harry with as much reverence as if receiving an Order of Merlin. To them, this was way more important than a bit of tin. This tiny box held the means to achieve their dreams, both twins were unusually lost for words.

Harry turned to the two youngest Weasleys. "Ron and Ginny, we still plan on going shopping today. Luna and Neville will be coming too."

Ginny agreed before Harry had finished speaking, Ron called off.

"I'll go with mum and dad, I might get to see Lavender."

Harry hated pushing this point but their security was at stake. "I would ask you all to ensure you're free of tracking charms before you return. Also, please don't let anyone else return with your portkey."

Ron again wanted to start arguing but his father got in first. "That will be no problem Harry, I'll need to report into the ministry and arrange some time off. Dumbledore will probably know that so we'll sweep everyone before returning."

The Weasleys left and Luna immediately turned to Ginny. "Sorry about earlier but I wasn't about to let Ron ruin what became one of

the best days of my life. He played a big part in rescuing my father and it clearly says so in the Prophet, we can't all get our picture on the front page. He should be proud, not jealous. He doesn't have to impress any girls now, he's got Lavender."

Ginny agreed, still trying to recover from her brothers revealing that she'd been drooling over that same picture. "So Harry, where are we going shopping?"

It was Hermione who answered with a wide grin on her face. "Don't worry Ginny, you'll love it!"

It was a rather embarrassed Emma who asked Neville a question. "Em, Neville, could I keep this copy of the Prophet?"

If anything, it was an even more embarrassed Neville who answered her. ""Sure Mrs Granger, my gran bought at least a dozen copies. I'm sure she's already sent a few to my Great Uncle Algie."

-oOoOo-

Their first stop on Diagon Alley was the new home of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes where Fred and George managed to take exuberance to a whole new level. For the twins, that was really saying something. On discovering they had a working floo, Ron immediately contacted Lavender.

Molly and Arthur were really impressed with the shop, the flat above it was perfect for the twins though they dreaded to think what the two pranksters would concoct in their new workshop. They decided to get the unpleasant part of their day over with first and flooed to the ministry.

Walking through the atrium was a revelation, and just a small sample of what Harry's life must be like. Molly and Arthur could feel every pair of eyes watching their slightest movement. Word must have spread quickly because Percy came bounding out the lift and straight into his mother's open arms.

"Mum, dad, I was so worried and had no way of contacting any of you. Is everyone else ok? We went and looked at the old house, there's nothing left. You're welcome to come and stay with me. It



would be a tight squeeze but at least you would have a roof over your head."

Molly just held tight to her wayward son, glad to have him once more in her arms. It was Arthur who picked up on something Percy had said. "We Percy? Who else was there with you?"

"Oh, Bill and Charlie. The attack was all over the Wizard Wireless Network yesterday. Today's Prophet has set off a storm in the ministry. The minister and director Bones both want to speak with you."

Arthur's voice was harsher than he intended but he needed to know. "Is that why you're here, because Fudge sent you?"

"No, I wanted to apologise for my behaviour. Bill and Charlie had a few words with me and forcibly pointed out the error of my ways. I put my career before my family, that will never happen again. Where were you last night?"

Arthur cut-in before Molly could say anything. "Staying somewhere safe. I suppose we should get this over with, then we can start organising getting our new house built."

This had Percy's jaw almost hitting the floor. "New house, how can you afford that?"

Arthur couldn't resist rubbing his son's nose in it. He'd broken his mother's heart and Arthur wasn't so instantly forgiving. "The Weasley family has some very good friends. Tell Bill and Charlie to meet us at twenty two Diagon Alley. That's the address of the twins' new shop, they've even got a lovely flat over it."

Percy could only nod in wonderment, He couldn't believe how upbeat and organised his parents were. His mother might be quieter than usual but Percy expected her to be in little pieces.

Molly and Arthur had no sooner been led into the minister's office, where Amelia and Cornelius were already waiting on them, when the door opened again. Dumbledore's spy system was impressive since they'd barely said hello before he got there to poke his nose in.

"Molly and Arthur, I'm so sorry over what happened to your home. If I can help in any way?"

Arthur wasn't buying this act anymore. "You can keep your sympathy, and your tracking charms, to yourself Albus. You told us the wards on the Burrow were as strong as you could make them. I trusted the lives of my family on those wards, it was pure luck there was nobody home when the death eaters came calling."

Amelia had a list of questions she wanted answers to, she wasn't about to see this opportunity hijacked. "Arthur, can you tell us how you knew the Burrow and the Lovegood's home were being attacked?"

Arthur had a few questions of his own before he answered anything. "Can I ask what's going on here? Is this some type of hearing, do I need representation? Are we going to be facing any sort of charges here?"

Amelia cleared the matter up at once. "None of the party that took part in that rescue are facing any charges whatsoever, quite the opposite. This is purely a fact finding meeting. I'm asking the questions on behalf of the DMLE, the minister may ask for clarification on a point or two. Professor Dumbledore has no official reason to be here."

Arthur nodded and decided to help. "Harry has a device that monitored the wards of his friends' homes. He appeared to know at once and, when Luna told him Xeno was at home, organised the rescue."

Albus was asking for clarification before anyone else had a chance. "Have you any idea what this device was? Did you actually see it?"

Both Weasleys looked toward Amelia and she smiled before asking her next question. "Can you tell us any more about the battle?"

Molly answered this one. "I have to say that Rita's report was fairly accurate, we were fighting for our lives and didn't really have time to take notes."

Amelia was satisfied with that answer, knowing first hand what being in the middle of a fight was like. "Do you know if Mr Potter cast any

spells on his sword that could account for it being so effective against the dementors?"

Arthur could see why Amelia was asking, a weapon to take down dementors was something the head of the DMLE would covet. "He used the sword of Godric Gryffindor, a goblin made magical blade. I don't think he would have time to cast eighty seven separate spells on the sword."

Cornelius was now suspicious. "How could you know that number? You were apparently too busy fighting to notice things yet you know a total the ministry is keeping secret?"

Molly actually laughed at the minister. "Just because neither Arthur nor I can do that, doesn't mean Hermione Granger can't. She was by Harry's side through the entire battle and that girl misses nothing."

Amelia tried to get the interview back onto her track. "Can I ask about your choice of spells used during the battle?"

This got Molly's back up. "Those death eaters weren't there to deliver birthday wishes, the kisses and presents on offer were of the deadly variety. They came with the sole purpose of wiping out the Weasleys and Lovegoods. We had no idea what we'd be facing so chose spells of what we considered an appropriate response. Four of our children were in the middle of that fight, would you have held back if Susan's life was on the line?"

Dumbledore just couldn't keep his nose out. "Four dead and two maimed for life is a terrible price to pay for a victory."

For a wee, stout woman, Molly could move at speed when she needed to as, much to his horror, Albus discovered. She had a firm grip of Dumbledore by his beard, painfully pulling the tall wizard's head down until his eyes were level with hers. "You listen to me you old goat. If the price of my children being safe was to behead every single one of those murdering bastards, I would take up my meat cleaver and do it without one ounce of remorse. If my children are in danger, the death eaters are going down hard."

Molly felt a hand on her shoulder and turned her head to see Amelia Bones standing there. "Molly, the reason I asked was because the

tactics used were so devastatingly effective. I intend to see my department adopt them. I agree totally with your opinion, in any choice between one of my aurors or a death eater going down, it's not a difficult decision. If my Susan's life were at stake, I would hit the bastards with everything that I had."

Arthur convinced Molly to release Dumbledore and they hoped this meeting wouldn't last much longer.

Cornelius now asked the question they were all desperate to know the answer to. "Arthur and Molly, it goes without saying that you know young Mr Potter very well. Is there anything we can do that would have him reconsider his decision to leave us?"

Arthur was able to answer with total honesty, something that was not missed by the rest in the room. "Cornelius, not one member of our family wants to see the young lad go, we're all very fond of him. I'm afraid there's nothing any of us can do. He appears to have his heart set on entering the muggle education system, his experiences at Hogwarts have apparently soured him against us."

Molly reluctantly agreed with her husband. "I wish I could say otherwise but it's a decision I can't see him changing. I've never seen Harry looking happier or healthier. For the first time ever, he appears to know exactly what he wants from life. I'm afraid another two years at Hogwarts just doesn't figure into his plans."

"Having Hermione by his side has also given the lad a confidence I've never seen in him before. She intends to return to Hogwarts yet even that wasn't enough to turn Harry from his chosen course."

Dumbledore stood there, ignored and forgotten. Not a situation he was familiar with. Well, if he couldn't get to Harry Potter, the boy would just have to come to Albus Dumbledore. He'd heard enough information here today to achieve that feat. With a muttered farewell the old wizard left the minister's office, he had work to do.

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Harry had cast a discrete expansion charm on the back seat of the new rental car, allowing all five friends to fit comfortably. All now wore beaming smiles as they returned to the villa. Three teenage witches had spent the day shopping and both wizards had

thoroughly enjoyed the experience too. They were laughing and joking, carrying their purchases back inside the villa when Harry froze. Everyone had now experienced this reaction before so when Harry looked in Neville's direction, the young wizard couldn't contain himself.

"Aw shit no Harry, not again? I just got them back, we can't let them be taken away. Not this time."

The determined set of Harry's face said more than his words ever could. "We won't Neville."

They rushed inside, all parcels and packages forgotten as Dan and Emma raced after them.

"Winky, are the Weasleys back yet?"

"No master Harry, they haven't returned yet."

"Could you please find the twins and tell them Neville's home is under attack. We will be leaving directly."

The little elf was gone as Harry turned to his friends, knowing there was no way he could leave without them.

"Ok, that leaves the five of us and the three Longbottoms already there. Hit hard, hit fast and be safe. We all stick together this time, are we ready?"

Harry had conjured a red plastic hula-hoop, which he made into a portkey. With one hand on the hoop and wands at the ready, they were off.

Dan and Emma were left staring into an empty space.

"Dan, there must be something we can do, someone we can contact? This watching our daughter go off to war is killing me, I feel so helpless."

Dan though had an idea and called for back-up. "Dobby, can you go and help protect the kids?"

"Dobby would love to Mr Granger, but Dobby doesn't have orders to protect them."

Dan wasn't for giving up so easily. "Dobby, have you been ordered not to protect them?"

A wide grin split the little guy's features before Dobby popped away.

"I hope Hermione isn't angry with you for putting Dobby in danger?"

"Hermione can be as angry with me as she likes. As long as she's here to shout at me, I'll quite happily let her."

-oOoOo-

The twins' new flat had become the centre for an impromptu Weasley family reunion. Bill and Charlie had turned up earlier with a million questions, not least of which was how the hell did two Firebolts make it into the Weasley Quidditch locker. The locker had gone unnoticed by the attackers as it was down by their old pitch.

Mismatched conjured and transfigured chairs littered their living area as Percy arrived with their parents and then Ron appeared with Lavender. Ron's rather rambunctious ribbing was interrupted by the worried little house elf who appeared in the middle of the room.

"Master Harry sent me, his friend Neville's home is being attacked. The five of them will have already left by now."

Fred was first to act. "Thanks Winky. George, try and get the Longbottoms on the floo. Otherwise we'll need to apparate as close as we can."

George shot out of the room while Ron began pacing up and down like a caged lion, he should have been there with them.

Bill was worried. "I thought you said Ginny was with Harry? Surely he wouldn't take her into a fight against death eaters?"

It was his father who answered. "Harry would get more of a fight if he tried to leave her behind. They all look out for each other, they're no longer children Bill."

The shout from downstairs clarified the position. "The floo is open and the Longbottoms aren't even aware they're under attack. Frank's floocalling the ministry then we can come through."

A quick kiss to Lavender and Ron was at the front of the queue, wand already in his hand.

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The sight that greeted the five young warriors was not one any of them had expected nor could have anticipated. There wasn't a death eater or dementor anywhere in the area. Instead, they were greeted by the grinning form of Albus Dumbledore.

"Oh that charm was quite ingenious Harry my boy. Once I found your monitoring thread, I was able to isolate it and begin to take it down. I knew it would appear as an alert on your monitoring device while the Longbottom wards don't even know I'm here. I'm very pleased you've finally stopped this childish behaviour and came to see me, we have a lot to talk about."

Albus was expecting an explosion and had prepared for it, he wasn't expecting it to come from the Longbottom lad though.

"You stupid, self-centred old bastard. Have you any idea of the agony you just put me through? Do you even care that I thought my parents were being attacked again? Harry, can I borrow your sword? I'm going to cut this fucker's head off!"

At that moment in time, Neville could actually have managed that feat. Albus Dumbledore found himself held by a spell that paralysed him from the neck down.

It took Harry a moment to understand that they had some unseen help, Both he and Hermione had seen Dobby do this before. Dumbledore was staring at Harry with fear in his eyes, he decided the whiskered old wanker didn't need to know any better. He secretly swore to buy Dobby some more socks, unaware that Hermione had just silently vowed the same. Harry started slowly walking toward the helpless old wizard, it was time to mess with Dumbledore's head.

"Albus, my old man, let me tell you a little story. Not about three brothers, cloaks, wands and stones, this one is a lot more recent than that. Two very powerful and ambitious young wizards spent an entire summer together in Godric's Hollow. Among other things, they were planning their version of the wizarding world. A world they would rule, for the greater good of course. Greater good, I fucking hate that phrase. How much shit have you pulled and then used that excuse to justify your actions to yourself?"

Harry wasn't sure if Dobby left Dumbledore able to speak but the old goat looked incapable of it at the moment. His revelations had Albus rendered speechless, wait until he heard the rest.

"Now eventually the two really good friends found themselves on different sides of a war, both still believing they were right. Neither noticing the young boy who was set to eclipse them both in his quest to rule the world. Now Albus, I need you to listen very carefully to the next bit, it gets right to the crux of the problems we're having here. See, unlike you, Gellert or Tom, I have no wish to be anyone's master."

With this, Harry plucked the elder wand from Dumbledore's paralyzed hand. Noticing the old wizard's eyeballs almost popped out his head.

"All I want is the right to live my life the way I want to, forge my own destiny. Now what's wrong with that? Nothing? Then why the fuck do you keep trying to stop me?"

Harry wasn't expecting an answer from Dumbledore, he still wasn't finished messing with his head though. "Tom appears just as determined to stop me living my life, he also ignored my warning to leave my friends alone. Tom will be dealt with a piece at a time before I finally finish him off. Do you want to put yourself on the same footing with me as Voldemort? I'm sick of your manipulations old man, I will live my life the way I want and there's nothing you can do about it. Harassing my friends will see you receiving the same treatment as dear old Tom. I want to live my life in peace and quiet, is that too much to ask? Kendra is so disappointed in you Albus, and Ariana says she wouldn't come even if you called for her."

Albus couldn't take his eyes off the elder wand in Harry's hand, he obviously knew all about the cloak and that last comment meant



Harry also had the resurrection stone. How else could he know about his mother and sister? That Harry was now the master of death terrified Dumbledore more than Tom and Gellert combined. If Harry should go dark, the world would tremble under his rule.

Harry still had one card left to play in Dumbledore's mindfuck, he slowly and gently replaced the elder wand back into the old wizard's hand. "Now my friends and I shall be leaving, I never want to see you again. I hope I've made my wishes plain."

Albus knew he was no longer the elder wand's master but even the thought of keeping it out of Harry's hands was a big incentive at the moment. His quip about taking care of Tom a piece at a time could mean Harry had discovered the existence of horcruxes, but obviously not that he had one behind his scar.

Albus Dumbledore was rightfully considered to have one of the best minds in the magical world. That great mind was currently at a total impasse on how the master of death was supposed to die so the dark lord could finally be killed.

Shouts then had the five of them turning around as a gang of redheads and Neville's parents were running toward them. Neville took off like an arrow shot from a bow, heading straight for his mum and dad.

With a cry of 'Bill, Charlie' Ginny was off too.

Hermione spoke quickly to Luna. "Do you want to stay and see Neville's ok? You've both got portkeys and there's also our two brilliant elves you can call on to pass a message."

"I understand some of what Neville's feeling right now, I'm going to stay."

Harry noticed Lavender trying to run in heels at the back of the group and knew it was time to go, the pops of the arriving aurors made both their minds up in an instant. Hermione and Harry headed back to France as Dobby released the headmaster and followed them.

Amelia had turned up with every auror she could lay her hands on, only to find Harry Potter leaving and that the culprit of the reported

attack was clearly the chief warlock. "Albus Dumbledore, you had better have an explanation that satisfies me or you'll be seeing the inside of a ministry cell."

Albus found himself once more bereft of answers and was promptly led away. He was infinitely more concerned at the implications of what Harry had revealed than he was over any charges Amelia could manufacture over this situation.

Thanks for reading

One more chapter of this then I will return to my other two WIPs

## Chapter 10

Hermione was cuddling into Harry as the young couple just enjoyed gazing at the night sky together. Luna had sent a note with Dobby to say she would be spending the night at the Longbottoms. Xeno was still under a potions regime that saw him spending at least twenty hours of the day asleep and both Granger parents had just left for bed.

Harry had explained the Hallows to Hermione and she now understood more of his confrontation with Dumbledore earlier today. She couldn't understand why Harry gave him the Elder Wand back though.

"Hermione, it's just too much power for one person to have. I'm keeping my dad's cloak and will find somewhere safe for the ring. Dumbledore can keep the wand since I am now its master. He destroyed Flamel's stone to stop Voldemort gaining its power yet walked around with the most powerful wand in the world up his sleeve. Can you imagine what Voldemort would do to get his hands on that? It's the hypocrisy that drives me mad, Dumbledore doesn't hold himself to the same rules and laws that he thinks should govern the rest of us. People have accepted that fact purely because he's Albus Dumbledore, they need to learn who Albus Dumbledore really is."

Hermione could see the sense in this and was so proud of Harry for reaching such a mature decision. She had something else troubling her though. "Harry, I'm worried about mum and dad. All our friends' homes have now suffered an attack but they have no protective wards to hide behind or give you a warning."

"I'm worried about that too. I could offer them Gimmauld Place to live for the foreseeable future but their dental practice has to be public. I've only been able to come up with one other solution and I doubt very much if your parents would agree with it."

"Surely it can't be that bad Harry?"

"Hermione, I think it's a wonderful idea but I'm not the one needing to be convinced."

Hermione's curiosity was now aroused. "Just what is this solution Harry?"

"As head of house, I have the right to ward any properties that contain members of my family."

Hermione could put things together quicker than anyone Harry had ever met. Mere seconds later, Harry found himself being dragged into the villa and Hermione was hammering on her parents' bedroom door.

Dan quickly opened the door, his expression clearly saying what now?

"DAD, Harry here has something he needs to ask you. Just say yes."

The bedroom door opened wider to reveal Emma standing there in her nightdress, eager to discover just what was going on. Harry had never envisaged doing this while Hermione's parents were getting ready for bed. Time once more to prove that tatty old hat put him in Gryffindor for a reason.

"Mr Granger, I'd like your permission to ask Hermione to marry me."

Dan stared at Harry suspiciously, hating where his thoughts were taking him. "Why the hurry? Was it really necessary to get us both out of bed? It couldn't wait until morning?"

Hermione could guess where her dad's mind just leapt. She may be blushing like an English tea rose but she stood her ground. "Dad, it's nothing like that. If I'm Harry's fiancée, that makes you both his family. This means he can legally place wards around our house and your practice, you've both seen how they protected our friends. I hate the thought of you two being so vulnerable to an attack."

Emma had her arm around Hermione as she led them into the bedroom. "Is this the only reason for doing this?"

The question was aimed at Hermione but Harry answered first. "Emma, I've made my intentions clear from the day we met. I love your daughter and hope one day she'll be my wife. We're not running into anything with our eyes closed here. An engagement

was always going to be part of our future. Doing it now not only offers you and Dan protection, it changes Hermione's legal standing in the magical community. As Lord Potter's fiancée, the ministry or purebloods would be crazy to try any moves against her."

Hermione had never relinquished hold of Harry's hand and now squeezed it to offer her support. "I also love Harry and want this with all my heart."

All eyes were now on Dan. "Well I suppose we'll need to go shopping tomorrow again, this time for a jewellers."

Hermione released her death grip on Harry's hand to hug both her parents, Harry though wasn't finished with his surprises for the night. Dobby popped into the room and handed his master a black, velvet covered ring box with a golden Potter family crest embossed into the material.

"As Hermione will be the future Lady Potter, the official family engagement ring should be worn. We can still visit a jewellers if Hermione doesn't like it."

Harry got down on one knee and opened the box. "Hermione, I love you with everything that I am. Will you marry me?"

Hermione's gaze never left the green eyes that meant so much to her. "Harry, it would be a dream come true for us to spend our lives together. Of course I'll marry you."

Harry slid the ring on her finger before rising to kiss his fiancée. Hermione's eyes were sparkling as Harry asked her another question.

"Well, do you like the ring or are we going shopping?"

Hermione realised she hadn't even looked at it, Harry was going to marry her and she didn't care about anything else. One glance at her engagement ring though was enough to take her breath away. She had to sit down on her parents bed as her knees started to wobble. "Oh Harry, its so beautiful, I love it."

Her mother's eyes were nearly popping out her head. "Oh my god Hermione, beautiful doesn't even come close to doing it justice."

Both Granger women now had their eyes locked on the Potter engagement ring. The stone was a flawless and colourless pear shaped diamond that must have been at least four carats. This was held in place by two golden Gryffins, that then blended beautifully into the gold ring. It was a masterpiece of any jeweller's craft.

Dan had also regained his voice. "Shit Harry, that ring must be worth more than our house."

"I don't know about that sir, it's a family heirloom. Hermione will one day pass it on to our eldest son when he asks his girl to marry him. The last person to wear that ring was my mum, she was hoping Hermione would wear it next. That makes it priceless to me."

This led to Harry receiving a heart-warming kiss from his new fiancée.

Something about this situation was bothering Emma thought so, since Harry was now family, she decided just to ask here and now. "Daniel Granger, you said yes far too easily there. Just what are you up to?"

Dan was attempting not to look like a rabbit caught in headlights, his attempt got lamer as his excuses dried up. "What? Harry just offered protection for the two most important people in my life. Was I supposed to say no?"

Silence.

"This is also something Hermione clearly wants very much."

Silence and stares.

"Ok, I thought if the house was protected, these two could come home with us. We see so little of Hermione, and it would also give us more of an opportunity to get to know Harry better."

This earned Dan hugs and kisses from his two favourite women before Harry discovered another thing Hermione had inherited from her mother. Emma had him in a 'Heremi-hug' and then emitted a squeal that he usually associated with a quick dash to the library rang in his ears.

"Oh you two, this means we get to throw you an engagement party."

Silence.

"We can invite all our friends who are always asking how Hermione's doing, give them a chance to see for themselves."

Silence and stares.

"Ok, so I want to show the kids off. It will also shut some of those snooty bitches up at the same time. I'm very proud of our daughter yet prevented from saying anything about her. Now, she's going to university, has a loving fiancé and Cynthia Payne Smith will choke on her own jealous bile when she sees that ring."

This again received a few hugs and kisses until Dobby popped back in and Harry interrupted.

"Did I forget to mention that the ring is part of a set worn on formal occasions, like an engagement party?"

Harry opened the box to reveal a matching diamond pendant necklace and earrings. All three Grangers had to sit down as Harry's actual wealth hit home.

-oOoOo-

Ginny was folding her new clothes and placing them in her wardrobe. Winky had wanted to do it when the little elf delivered them. She'd never had new clothes before and this gave Ginny a chance to savour them all over again. Harry had pointed out that, since it was his fault they would be spending time in the muggle world, it was only fair he bought the muggle clothes they needed. Ginny had no idea how much time they would be spending in the muggle world but Harry appeared to have bought enough clothes to cover any and all occasions she could possibly think of.

Ginny was expecting trouble from her mother, thankfully that never materialised. Winky's appearance at Neville's house with a note from Harry saying that all Weasleys were welcome at the villa was greeted with large smiles. Bill, Charlie and Percy joining them in

France had her mother walking on cloud nine. Nothing made Molly Weasley happier than having all her children under one roof again.

Ginny heard the knock on her room door and a worried looking Ron stuck his head in. "Ginny, can I talk to you for a moment?"

Ron sitting there and not even commenting on her new clothes alerted Ginny this could be bad.

"It's Lavender."

This could be very bad. "Ron, I don't know if I'm the one you should be asking for relationship advice. Also, I never, ever want to hear any details of what you and Lavender get up to. Share all the bodily fluids you want, just don't tell me about it."

"It's not like that Ginny, it's probably worse."

Ginny had thrown that last bit in as a joke to lighten the mood, now she was seriously worried. She could only wait as her brother screwed up his courage.

"Teen Witch Weekly somehow heard that Lavender was at Harry's birthday party, they contacted her."

"Oh Ron, please don't tell me she gave them an interview? They contacted Neville and were abruptly told to get lost."

"No, again it's worse. She refused to give them an interview, so they offered her a job. As you know, she's an avid reader so they came up with the idea of getting her perspective on things."

Ginny could see where this was going. "They especially want her to write about anything connected with Harry or his friends?"

Ron nodded in agreement. "She's writing an article for this weeks issue. You can bet Harry's party will get more than a mention."

"Please tell me this is a prank the twins put you up to?" Ron's lack of response saw Ginny lose it. "Fuck sake Ron, you know what Harry's like better than I do. He'll go ape shit if one of his so-called friends starts writing stories about him."



"You think I don't know that Ginny? What am I supposed to do? Lavender sees this as a career opportunity. Writing about fashion for a magazine is her dream job, this is a foot in the door."

Ginny was shaking her head as she attempted to think this through. "If she writes anything bad about Harry, Hermione will scalp her. The twins were spot on, Hermione can be one scary witch when she wants to be. I don't even want to think what Harry will do if Lavender writes anything bad about Hermione?"

They were silent for a moment as both considered this. "You do realise this means Lavender can't be in Harry's company again? No one would be able to say a word for fear of seeing it in print."

Ron couldn't really argue with his sister's assessment, it matched his own perfectly. "That's my problem Ginny, I really like Lavender. It won't be long until we go back to Hogwarts and Harry won't be there anyway."

"Ron, you need to think hard about this situation. If you side with Lavender, we won't be able to talk about anything other than Quidditch or the weather. Lavender's tongue would soon have yours telling her anything she wants."

Again Ron couldn't argue, Lavender's kisses were simply awesome.

"If we're going to meet Harry in the muggle world we won't be able to tell you, far less take you along. You'll be reducing your circle of friends to just Lavender, unless Parvati hangs about with you two."

Ron had already known all this before he entered his sister's room, hearing his fears confirmed did not make him feel any better. "Lavender's already writing the article Ginny, could you warn Harry and Hermione for me? I don't think I could face them at the moment."

Ginny could see this was hurting Ron but he'd made his choice. "Ok Ron, I can do that but you need to do something for me. Try and get a copy of the bloody thing before it hits the streets, perhaps we can limit the damage. It will at least give us some idea of how bad this mess is going to be."

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Remus answered the door of his cottage to find Amelia Bones standing there.

"Hello Mr Lupin, can I speak with you and Miss Tonks for a moment?"

It was a surprised Tonks who watched her old boss walk into their living room. "Madam Bones, what are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to hold on to one of my department's most promising assets. There has been a lot of time, effort and gold spent on making you the outstanding auror that you are today. I will do everything within my power to ensure I don't lose that."

Tonks was thrilled, embarrassed but mainly confused. "I'm sorry Madam Bones but I can't see any other options. I want to marry Remus more than I want to be an auror. Current ministry law prevents me from doing both. Are you proposing to change the law?"

Amelia sadly shook her head. "I'm sorry, as much as I'd like to, we'd never get that passed the Wizengamot at the moment. What I'm about to suggest is working within the current rules and laws to make it possible for you to do both. Arthur Weasley actually began the germination of this idea when delivering Harry's question to the minister. I'm assuming you both know what Mr Potter is proposing?"

Tonks confirmed they did before asking a question of her own. "Yes, but since Remus here hasn't done anything, there is nothing to pardon."

"I'm aware of that. It just got me thinking of a way that would make your relationship acceptable under current ministry rules. An Order of Merlin completely changes Mr Lupin's legal status, removing any barrier to Mrs Lupin continuing as an auror."

Amelia quite enjoyed the shocked looks on both their faces, she continued with her pitch before they could find reasons to object. "I would hasten to point out this is in no way a form of charity, both of you have earned these awards. The fight at the ministry, in which Miss Tonks was injured, and then the dramatic rescue of Mr Lovegood qualifies you both. Neither of you needed to be there on

either of those occasions, you voluntarily threw yourselves fully into the fray."

She gave this a moment to sink in before continuing. "The so-called ministry six will also be receiving them, that's currently scheduled for the first of September at Hogwarts. All eight of you have fought in the two most important battles of this war, and emerged victorious. These awards are thoroughly deserved."

Remus' thoughts had moved in a different direction though. "Does this mean Pettigrew could escape justice because he has an order of Merlin?"

"No, not at all Mr Lupin. Peter Pettigrew was awarded his posthumously because he supposedly died a heroic death. Should he prove to be alive, that would most certainly negate his award."

"Oh he's alive all right, I've spoken to the rat. Harry stopped Sirius and I killing him, a decision that came back to haunt us all since the rat was responsible for Voldemort's return. I'm not sure about this award Madam Bones, it may change my legal status but nothing else. My lycanthropy will still see me treated as a second class citizen of our magical society."

Remus had to reign himself in before he went on a rant about the bigotry that was prevalent in their community. "I've had many jobs in the muggle world and it holds no fears for me, Dora's father is a muggleborn so she's comfortable there too. Harry is the last remaining link to my best friends and also a young man I admire very much. I will not lose contact with him. This is something my fiancée and I are going to have to discuss before we can reach a decision. I would like to thank you for the offer and I think I can speak for both of us when I say we're honoured even to be considered."

Amelia was surprised, she thought they would jump at the offer. The head of the DMLE was far from finished though, it was time to lay all her cards on the table. "Mr Lupin, I see this as a fantastic opportunity to begin changing the magical community's attitude to werewolves. An Order of Merlin recipient and being married to a senior auror sends out a powerful message. That message is one of tolerance and being able to see the person, not just the disease."

Tonks did a double take at the mention of Remus being married to a senior auror but Amelia had more up her sleeve.

"Susan told me that in her five years at Hogwarts, she's only had two good defence teachers. Professor Lupin and Harry Potter. I don't think we'll be able to convince Mr Potter to take up the post but I was hoping to have better luck with you."

Tonks was gobsmacked. "Wow boss, senior auror and Hogwarts professor with a couple of Orders of Merlin thrown in? You must want us pretty bad? Can you swing this past the minister and Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore is actually in a ministry cell, currently having the facts of life explained to him for that stunt he pulled at Longbottom Manor yesterday. Molly Weasley and Augusta Longbottom wanted to do the explaining personally, we spared him that. Dumbledore will do what he's told."

Amelia knew she couldn't hold the sly old fox much longer but intended to wring this concession out of him before he was released.

"The minister sees you both as two powerful individuals who are dedicated to fighting the death eaters. That you're both friends of Harry Potter and anti-Dumbledore doesn't hurt either. Yes, the minister will get his positive headline but I think that's a fair trade-off. Hogwarts gets an excellent defence professor and you are given the perfect platform to show our youth that werewolves are not dark creatures. I also get my auror back. Sorry, senior auror."

Remus was really moved by Amelia's offer, it was very rare for him to be given opportunities like this. "It's a very tempting offer Madam Bones. My year spent teaching at Hogwarts was easily one of the most enjoyable of my life. There's also being able to see Severus Snape's face when I get awarded an Order of Merlin and the job he really wants. Can we think about it and let you know?"

"Remus love, I know this is something you really want. You're a born teacher. I've also spent years becoming the best auror I can be, this is our chance to have it all. Get married, have a family and create the life we want for our children."

"Children? As in more than one?"

"Well I think the world needs more marauders. It's down to us until Harry and Hermione are a bit older."

Amelia could see this was something they both really wanted and she soon got her yes, she left the cottage a very happy witch.

"So Miss Tonks, we both apparently have responsible jobs and will be held up as examples for the younger generation. I don't think we can continue to live in sin any longer."

Remus watched as his fiancée really did become long faced, he decided he'd teased her enough. "I think we need to organise a wedding and then I'll see Minerva about married quarters."

Dora never actually said anything, Remus just assumed from the way she pounced on him that his fiancée agreed with that plan.

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It didn't take Ginny long to discover why there was a party-like atmosphere at the other villa. Luna's dad back on his feet and being able to join them beside the pool might have contributed. Ginny was sure though that it was more to do with the French sunshine hitting that massive sparkler on Hermione's finger, throwing off a light show the twins would be proud of. Ginny's face fell as she realised what she was here to do, Ron certainly owed her for this one.

Hermione of course noticed Ginny's disappointment when she spied her ring. "Is there something wrong Ginny? I was sure you would be happy for us."

"Oh Hermione, I'm delighted for you and Harry, you guys were made for each other. It just makes what I've got to say all the harder. Ron's so going to pay for dumping this on me today"

Ginny took a deep breath before continuing. "Ron told me last night that Lavender had been approached by Teen Witch Weekly. They originally wanted an interview after Lavender had broadcast it all over Britain that she was at Harry's birthday party. When she knocked them back, they offered her a job as a reporter. She bit their hand off and will have an article in this week's issue, you can guess who'll feature heavily in it."

This was met by silence, her four friends and the adults didn't know what to say. Unbelievably, the silence was broken when Hermione started to giggle. This proved infectious and also released any tension Ginny's revelation had caused. If Hermione was laughing, things couldn't be that bad.

It was Harry who got to ask the question. "Hermione, I realise I'm not as smart as you but I fail to see the funny side of this. What's tickled you?"

"Harry, I couldn't help it. The only thing I've seen Lavender read, apart from Teen Witch Weekly, are cheap bodice rippers. We are talking about the girl whose favourite subject is divination. I was just imagining her first headline and couldn't hold my laughter in."

Ron Ron to the Rescue!

This did indeed raise some more laughter but Emma wasn't happy.

"Hermione, that was unkind and uncalled for. Ignoring Lavender's academic abilities, this article could do a lot of harm. You yourself told us people in the magical community tend to believe what they read. This is being written by one of Harry's friends, lending credibility to whatever she writes."

Harry had to agree with Emma. "Hermione, look how many people bought Lockhart's lies. I seem to remember a certain second year witch being rather taken with the cowardly ponce that nearly got Ginny, Ron and I killed. Ginny, what's Ron saying about this article?"

"Well I would have to say he's not happy about it, but he intends to continue seeing Lavender."

Harry understood Ron's decision, didn't mean he had to like it though. "That's his choice but he has to know we can't very well invite what would effectively be a spy into our camp. Even when Ron's here on his own, we'll have to be careful and not say anything we don't want to see in print. I have every confidence in Lavender's abilities to wangle anything she wants out of Ron. Does he understand this Ginny?"

"I explained all this to him yesterday, right after he told me. Ron's not exactly thinking with his brain at the moment Harry. Fred told me Lavender paraded him up and down Diagon Alley yesterday, almost as if she was showing a prize bull at market. She's practically leading Ron around by the nose, and he's loving every minute of it."

Luna let out a loud yuck. "Thanks for that Ginny, there's an image I didn't need."

Hermione was back in serious mode. Realising that her mother was right and silently promising to pay Harry back for his Lockhart quip. At least he didn't mention her drawing little hearts on her timetable. "Harry, perhaps you should meet with Rita soon. Any story coming directly from you would carry a lot more weight than anything Lavender will write. The best way to deal with this might be to ridicule it."

Luna disagreed. "Hermione, how do you think Ron will react if Harry publicly ridicules his girlfriend? I think it might be better to arrange the interview for after Lavender's article comes out. Any liberties she's taken can be dealt with honestly and directly. Ron was there too, I know that love is supposed to be blind but even he must recognise the truth when he sees it. If not, there's nothing more we can do."

Neville agreed with his girlfriend but also had a suggestion to add. "Harry, it might be better to have the head of the DMLE there. I think it would help if Madam Bones heard it from you, rather than reading this in the Prophet. She's just as dedicated to seeing the end of Voldemort as you are. Susan is the only family she has left, the death eaters saw to that. I could speak to dad and arrange the meeting at my house."

"Nev, that's a couple of brilliant ideas there. How about we don't even tell them I'm going to be there? Spring it on them as a surprise, they really won't know what hit them."

Dan, Emma and Xeno invited themselves along as well, it was a given his friends and fiancée would be there. They wanted to keep their engagement a secret until Lavender's article was printed, thus showing she was not the close friend they were sure her article was certain to portray her as. This put pressure on Ginny but she readily agreed. It was only for a couple of days and she intended to spend

most of her time here anyway. They would soon all have to be returning to Britain.

Remus and Tonks arrived by their portkeys to announce their great news, Harry quickly agreed to be best man. On hearing what they were planning, Tonks thought including Madam Bones was a brilliant idea. Both also invited themselves along to the meeting.

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Lavender refused all Ron's efforts to read her article before it was published, claiming it might bring her bad luck. Therefore, it was with a sense of trepidation that they all waited on the magazine hitting the newsstands. Luna was actually staying with the Longbottoms in Britain so she could pick up a few copies and portkey to the villa. As expected, the picture of Harry, Hermione and Neville was prominent on the front cover. The headline though set the tone of the entire article.

Sixteen Candles - Eighty-Seven Dementors - What a Birthday Party!

The ministry six certainly know how to party. One minute it was dancing by the swimming pool, the next it was duelling dementors and death eaters.

Lavender certainly knew her target audience, and what was important to them. The only details given of the battle were rather reminiscent of Lockhart describing how not to chip a nail when battling a werewolf. There were more paragraphs dedicated to how the girls tied their hair back for battle than there were about tactics used. Their relationships were also mentioned in depth though no sarcastic comments or cheap shots were taken.

Ginny though was mortified when Lavender raised the point that she was the only member of the ministry six currently not attached. It was Lavender's confident prediction this wouldn't last long when the beautiful redhead returned to Hogwarts that had Ginny cringing. Lavender did make a great deal of them all being able to use the patronus charm to fight against the dementors, and that it was taught to them by none other than Harry Potter.

The whole thing read like some teenage fantasy. Ron kissing his girlfriend goodbye before going to fight a battle, he returned



victorious and they partied the night away. No mention of tears or terror, apparently fear just didn't exist for the ministry six.

There was thankfully also no mention made of their plans for Voldemort. To the readers of Teen Witch Weekly, Harry Potter wearing a silk shirt that matched the colour of his eyes was much more important.

Their feelings were mostly that of relief. There wasn't anything written there that Harry was going to have to slap down hard enough to erode their friendship with Ron any further.

There were also a couple of massive stories in the Prophet that would pull adult attention away from any teen magazine. The remaining dementors had all defected from Voldemort and returned to Azkaban, begging forgiveness. The dark lord had promised them as many souls as they wanted, if they did his bidding. The boy with the blade had the ability to make them extinct if they chose that option. The dementors knew which option scared them the most.

There was also the official announcement that the ministry six, with Remus and Tonks, were to receive Order of Merlin's. The ceremony was scheduled to take place on the first of September at Hogwarts.

It was now time to write the Prophet headline for tomorrow.

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Hermione was holding her fiancée tight as they sat quietly, bathed in the gentle moonlight of the warm French evening. The day had been anything but gentle for Harry. Wounds that he thought had been healed were reopened and would soon bleed all over the pages of the Prophet. It had started so well too.

Both Madam Bones and Rita had gratefully accepted that Harry would answer any questions, except those that might expose his sources. There was also a quick discussion on whether it should be publicly announced that Voldemort had created horcruxes, the fear was of anyone attempting to copy the madman. The consensus was soon reached that knowing what a horcrux was didn't mean Daily Prophet readers would be rushing out to make one. Voldemort wasn't actually much of an advert for attempting this process and no

creation details would be discussed, other than to say it was the darkest of magic.

Harry then proceeded to give everyone present the life history of Tom Marvolo Riddle. It was an exceedingly grim tale in parts, especially the prophecy that led to his parents' murder, but Harry pushed on. When he spoke about destroying Riddle's horcruxes, and the plan in place for dealing with Voldemort now, the reporter almost swallowed her quill. Rita asked three times for confirmation that the reward was actually five hundred thousand galleons.

It took over four hours by the time the questions were finished. Madam Bones appeared ready to gut Dumbledore after discovering that he knew about Voldemort's horcruxes but then did bugger-all about them.

The Longbottom hospitality included an early dinner at which Madam Bones asked a simple question. "Harry, if this works and the world is finally rid of Voldemort, will we see you return to magical society?"

It wasn't the question that affected Harry so much, more the expressions of hope on some of the faces that Harry thought he'd explained his reasons to. He took the decision there and then to kill off the boy-who-lived once and for all time.

Harry then treated them to a detailed view of his childhood pre-Hogwarts, a childhood Dumbledore had condemned him to. A blow by blow account of his years at Hogwarts followed, Ginny cried when he was describing the chamber of secrets incident. Amelia was not the only one out for blood when she saw his hand with 'I must not tell lies' engraved into it.

Only Hermione had known the full story, she held Harry's hand during the telling and watched the opinions hardening around the room as his story unfolded. Her parents would certainly have withdrawn her from Hogwarts if there weren't already plans in place for her to leave.

The Longbottoms, Xeno and Madam Bones all had children attending and returning to Hogwarts. All were also now greatly concerned and would be demanding assurances.

Rita was practically glowing with excitement but at least had the good grace to try to hide it. She came here today expecting an interview with the Longbottoms. Instead, she'd just been handed the two biggest stories of her life. She would bet that everyone else would think like Harry's friends. When Voldemort was gone, Harry Potter would return to them. Rita would be able to hit them with another exclusive after they had digested her expose of Tom Riddle.

Telling everyone his life story had a far greater effect on Harry than he'd anticipated, which was why he was currently wrapped in Hermione's arms. He spoke for the first time in what seemed like hours.

"I don't want their pity Hermione, that's not why I did it. I just couldn't bear to see the hope in their eyes, knowing they were going to be disappointed. I thought I'd made it plain I would be leaving for good. If our friends didn't get it, how could I expect anyone else to?"

"Do you honestly think Ginny, Luna or Neville pity you? Admire? Yes. Love? Probably. Feel terrible that their friend has had such a shitty life? Certainly. No one will ever regard you the same after hearing or reading that, I assumed that's why you did it."

Harry gave her a wry smile. "I'm tearing down Dumbledore's reputation and credibility. Destroying the myth and mystique of the invincible Lord Voldemort. It was time for the boy-who-lived to die. I don't want to become the hero of this piece Hermione, I just want to fade away into the background and be forgotten about."

This earned him a tight, comforting squeeze from his fiancée. "You'll always be my hero Harry, never lose that saving people thing."

This generated his first smile of the night. "You're one of the very few people in my life who just sees Harry. Not the boy-who-lived or some freak. I can't tell you how much that means to me."

"Harry love, this ring you put on my finger tells me everything I need to know. You also see the real Hermione, you love me in spite of all my faults and insecurities."

Harry then proceeded to kiss each and every one of those insecurities goodbye as the young couple drew comfort from each other.

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Ginny portkeyed into the villa to find herself engulfed by her family, a party was in full swing. "Ginny, we're so proud of you and Ron. Two Order of Merlin's in the family. Your father and I are so proud. Where have you been? We've been trying to contact you since we heard the news. All Winky would say was that you already knew and were with Harry."

After listening to Harry's revelations about Harry's life, a party was the last thing Ginny wanted. "I knew about the award a couple of days ago mum, Madam Bones told Remus and Tonks."

This silenced everyone before Ron's whine broke the quiet. "You knew and didn't tell me? I think I had a right to know."

Ginny took this opportunity to unload on her brother. "Right to know? Is that the journalist in Lavender rubbing off on you already? I warned you we wouldn't be able to tell you anything for fear of it appearing in banner headlines under Miss Brown's name. Your two supposed best friends are now engaged and the reason you don't know is because your two new best friends live under Lavender's jumper. Everyone else was there for Harry today but not you, I hope she's worth it Ron?"

Molly spun Ginny back around to face her. "What happened? Is Harry all right? Why weren't any of us there?"

"Harry had a meeting with Madam Bones and Rita Skeeter. I think he revealed a lot more than he intended. I was in tears just listening to him talking about it, he's had to live it. Thanks to Ron's girlfriend, you're just going to have to read about it like everybody else. Please excuse me, I'm going to my room."

Ginny was fighting back the tears as she left.

Molly was intent on following her daughter but Bill's hand on her shoulder halted that idea. "I'll go mum. Something is clearly bothering her, she may open up to me. If she does though, I probably won't be able to tell you about it."

"I don't care Bill, just see if you can help her."

Bill found Ginny sitting on her bed, staring at the picture of her friends fighting the dementors. "That picture is really something, I don't know if I could have stood there against the dementors."

"You would if Harry was there too. He touches something deep inside you that makes you never want to let him down, you just know he'll always be there for you. It just hit me today that I'm only going to be able to see him a few times a year. Even though I wasn't always in his company like Ron, I always knew he'd be there if I needed him."

Bill noticed his sister's silent tears but chose not to mention them. "Ginny, I don't know Harry but get the impression he won't desert his friends. You are clearly one of his best friends and very dear to him. What set you off today?"

"Oh Bill, he's had such a terrible life. His muggle relatives treated him like a freak and then the magical world treated him even worse. If I was Harry, I would leave and never come back."

"Is that what's bothering you, or is it the fact Harry's now engaged?"

Ginny's blush didn't seem to match the tears but it was there none the less. "Half the witches in Britain will be crying when they read about Harry's engagement, I won't be one of them. These tears are for my friend Harry, and Hermione. I don't care what they say, Hermione won't be at Hogwarts for long when Harry's not there. I'm going to be losing two of my best friends."

Bill put his arm around his sister and pulled her into his chest. "Listen to me Ginny, they seem like a very nice and smart couple. There is no way they would lose touch with someone as special as you."

Ginny cuddled into her oldest brother as her tears gradually stopped. "Harry's already pretty-much told me the same thing, and he'd never lie about something like that. Thanks Bill, I think I just needed to hear it from someone else."

Bill couldn't help but think his sister was becoming an outstanding young witch, the company she kept had a lot to do with that. The esteem Harry was held in by his family was shocking to the eldest

Weasley boy, that was until Bill realised what the lad had done for his family.

He'd not only saved Ginny's life, but dad's as well. He was funding a new burrow, funding the twin's new business and played a major part in his two youngest siblings receiving an Order of Merlin. Bill couldn't see any way Harry Potter was going to abandon the Weasley family now. Ginny might not see her friends as often as she liked but Bill thought they would always be there for her.

-oOoOo-

Like Ginny, Luna was on her bed and crying at the thought of losing her friends. Unlike Ginny, she had no older brother there to offer comfort and words of advice. The Lovegoods were back in their own house which allowed her to stare once more at her artwork on the ceiling. Her friends meant so much to her. Also like Ginny, Luna knew Hermione would soon follow Harry out of Hogwarts.

Her intelligence was telling her that Harry would always be her friend, her heart was still breaking though. Listening to what Harry had to endure growing up was mostly responsible for her distress. That, and she realised the significance behind the move. Harry was deliberately burning his bridges, he wouldn't be coming back to the magical community. Both she and Neville were committed to keeping Harry and Hermione in their lives, neither made friends easy enough that they could let two of their best friends just walk away.

Harry would be moving in with the Grangers for the remainder of the summer, Luna already knew her way there and both Ginny and Neville were keen to accompany her.

Thinking about Neville slowly halted her tears. They were getting on really well together and he appeared very happy to be her boyfriend. Luna was hoping with all her heart that this wouldn't become just a summer romance, falling apart when they returned to Hogwarts.

She understood that Neville would now be considered quite the catch, and there were certainly witches at school who would offer him a lot more than Luna was prepared to do at the moment. She didn't think Neville was that type of boy but wouldn't know until some witch draped herself on him. Luna could only wait and see, she

actually wasn't looking forward to her trip with her father this year. Luna knew she would miss her friends, and especially Neville.

-oOoOo-

Do you want to earn 500,000 galleons and a ministry pardon?

Draco caught the attention-grabbing headline and couldn't wait to read more. His eyes were the size of dinner plates before he was even half finished digesting the rest of the article.

Malfoy Manor then rang to the sound of the dark lord's rage. Draco couldn't hide the shudder of fear that ran through his body. This was going to be bad, this was going to be really, really bad.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 11

Voldemort knew he had to respond, it had to be targeted, brutal and public. Potter's revelations and massive reward had left him afraid to turn his back on his own followers, far less try to sleep. This was hardly the ideal preparations to plan a major attack. Nevertheless, the current situation demanded he hit back. The last few attempts had failed spectacularly because they had vastly underestimated the boy, that wouldn't happen again.

It was hardly surprising though, Snape had taught the boy for five years and still had an extremely low opinion of Potter. The Malfoy boy was as bad, both these opinions were worthless as they were marinated in the jealousy of the two Slytherins.

It was time for serious thought on how to turn the boy's weaknesses against him. It was also time magical Britain understood what happened to those who crossed Lord Voldemort. He wasn't sure if killing the boy would put an end to this infernal five hundred thousand bounty on his head, it would certainly make anyone consider twice before trying to earn it.

What he really needed now was information on Potter, and a good night's sleep.

-oOoOo-

With Luna and Xeno's travel plans already set, the engagement party at the Grangers had to be quickly arranged. There was no way Harry or Hermione wanted Luna to miss it, that and Neville would have been miserable all night. Dobby and Winky were soon caught up in the excitement of a party for their master and mistress, this left Emma only needing to send out the invitations.

The wizards and witches on the guest list though would require quite a bit of thought on their part. Luna, Neville and Ginny were spending a lot of time with them in the muggle world and would easily cope with an evening full of non-magicals. Remus and Tonks would also effortlessly blend into the crowd. Xeno stood out even in the magical world, he wouldn't last two minutes. To be truthful, Molly and Arthur weren't too much better. Letting Arthur loose in a muggle house was a big enough risk, he would certainly raise a few eyebrows when he started talking about his plug collection. The twins wouldn't be able



to resist the temptation to pull some pranks, irrespective of whether the party was magical or not.

The real problem was what to do about Ron. For Harry and Hermione, the thought of their engagement party without Ron being present was not a realistic one. They both wanted him there. To invite Ron without Lavender would only increase the strain on their friendship, not something either of them wanted to do. Forcing him to choose was not only unfair, it could see five years worth of friendship washed away. The five friends were already spending a lot of time together and Ron was slowly being marginalised. They would have to invite Lavender too and just try some damage limitation on the evening.

Emma couldn't believe how quickly the entire thing came together, especially with the two elves in charge. Nothing was too much trouble and everything was possible, oh how she loved magic.

-oOoOo-

Molly was crying her eyes out, it was now easy to see why Ginny was so upset last week in France. The Weasleys were back in Britain, staying at a rejuvenated Grimmauld Place while construction on the new Burrow gathered pace. The Daily Prophet lay on the table and was responsible for Molly's tears. Rita had played it masterfully, giving everyone a chance to digest her last article on Tom Riddle before coming back with the heartbreaking story of Harry's life.

The headline of 'Why Harry Potter is leaving us' certainly grabbed everyone's attention.

In an exclusive interview, Harry Potter laid to rest the myth of the boy who lived. There was no pampered life of plenty for the Potter child, quite the opposite. All his life Harry has been denied love, affection and even the basic knowledge of who he really is.

Left on a muggle doorstep as a baby, our saviour was systematically abused by these magic hating muggles. The same wizard who left him on that doorstep was prominent in the abuse, scars and misinformation Harry was met with in his five years of Hogwarts. Since his parents were murdered that fateful Halloween, every figure with authority over his life has failed this young wizard. Even in his

five years at Hogwarts, every one of them has been marked by attempts on his life. That these attempts have usually been by the very people supposed to protect him might lead to some understanding of his decision.

Harry Potter has chosen to continue his education in the muggle world, he also intends to live and work there. This is not a decision he's reached lightly, he will be leaving behind friends who share a bond of standing beside him through some horrendous experiences. Their response to the recent attacks in Ottery St Catchpole should leave no one in any doubt what these young people mean to each other.

Harry Potter will also be leaving his fiancée behind. Yes ladies it's true, Harry Potter is already off the market. His intended is of course Miss Hermione Granger, his constant companion since first year and the top student at Hogwarts. Miss Granger has expressed her desire to sit her NEWT exams, a position supported by her fiancé.

Starting on page two, read Harry's life story in his own words.

There then followed pages describing events from Privet Drive and Hogwarts. No reader could be left in any doubt that Harry Potter suffered through enough trials and tribulations to make anyone cry no more!

It certainly made Molly Weasley cry and she wouldn't be alone. Ginny though had done her crying. As powerful as it was to see the events written down like that, nothing could compare to listening as Harry told the story. She was getting ready to leave and spend the day with her friends, Harry would certainly need cheering up today. It was just a pity Rita couldn't have waited twenty four hours but then again, except for a small group of friends, no one knew what was happening tonight.

"Mum, I'll be spending the day at Hermione's. I'll also be late home, Emma's throwing an engagement party for the Grangers' muggle friends tonight. With Luna leaving on Saturday, they've rushed it through so she could be there." Her mother appeared ready to burst into a new flood of tears so Ginny quickly put her mind at rest.

"Harry and Hermione intend to hold another one when Luna comes back her holiday."

Ron had read The Prophet and felt terrible for his best friend. That he wasn't there for Harry when he had to tell the story cut him deeply. The Hogwarts stuff he pretty much knew, Ron was involved in most of it. Reading that his life with the muggles was even worse than he thought it was really hit painfully home.

Something else that also hit painfully home was hearing Ginny talk about Harry and Hermione's engagement party. This was the first he had heard of it and it certainly emphasised how much things had changed between them. His attention though was captured by a white envelope his sister placed in front of him.

"You didn't think they wouldn't want you there did you? The invitation inside is also a portkey to take you and Lavender to Hermione's." Ron's entire face lit at this news.

"You both need to be there about six before their muggle guests start arriving, and tell Lavender to leave her notebook at home."

He was happily nodding in agreement. "I won't tell Lavender about it until later. Then she'll be so busy getting ready that there won't be time for her to tell anyone about it until tomorrow. Tell them thanks Ginny, and that we'll be there."

This drew a smile from Ginny. "Now you're learning Ron, never doubt that Harry and Hermione are your friends."

Molly rose and hugged her daughter before she left. "Tell Harry and Hermione congratulations from us. If we can get the new Burrow finished in time, perhaps we could hold their other engagement party there?"

Ginny could see this was perking her mother up so went along with it. "I'll tell them mum. Even if that's not possible, a house-warming is just as good an excuse for a party." Ginny picked up her bag, she could already see her mother mentally running through the food she would serve at the party.

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Hermione was showing them round her home town. She'd noticed a few people she knew from before she left for Hogwarts, some of

them might even be coming to their party tonight. Hermione felt none of the apprehension she usually associated with meeting any of them, she was with Harry and their friends. Anyone trying to antagonise her now would certainly be met with a response they wouldn't expect from the normally passive bushy haired bookworm.

She led them into Pizza Hut for lunch. As well as being a new experience for the group, it would save Dobby and Winky having to cook for them. The elves had quiet enough to do with tonight's party, though Hermione had to admit they both appeared very happy with having plenty of work.

Harry waited until Hermione had ordered before speaking quietly to the group. "We're being watched, at the moment I don't know who by. I'm going to take a quick look and yes dear, I'll be very careful. Sit here and enjoy your lunch, act as normally as you can."

Harry made his way into the gents before putting Godric's training to good use. It was an invisible Harry Potter who apparated out of the restaurant toilet. The hunters were about to become the hunted.

Alastor Moody was in an alley that was a delivery entrance, he was also under an invisibility cloak as his magical eye swept the restaurant in front of him for Potter. The cold steel that pressed into the back of his neck almost had the battle hardened old auror soiling himself. He was Alastor Moody, fanatical follower of constant vigilance, nobody snuck up on him.

"Take it easy there Mad Eye, even you aren't fast enough to move before the sword of Gryffindor severs your spine. You've suffered enough injuries to know what that would mean so let's not have any accidents here. Would you care to tell me what the fuck you're doing following me about?"

Moody was in a pickle here, he knew Potter was right. The sword had pushed through his invisibility cloak and now rested between his vertebrae, one wrong move and he wouldn't be needing his peg leg any more. What really terrified Moody though was that he still couldn't detect Potter, only the voice told him who he was dealing with.

That this mere boy had him cold, and that he still couldn't see or sense a thing other than when the boy spoke really terrified him. It

wouldn't do to let that show. "Potter, it's a free country. I'm perfectly entitled to stand here."

"Don't give me that shit Mad Eye, you're following me under an invisibility cloak. I warned that manipulative old bastard to leave me alone, I also warned him I would take action if he didn't."

Oh shit, this could turn ugly. Stall, stall stall, wait for an opening. "What makes you think I'm here under Dumbledore's orders?"

"Because you won't work for Fudge and I don't think you have any personal axe to grind with me. The order has no business in Crawly, the Grangers are under the protection of House Potter. I regard Dumbledore, and anyone he sends, as an enemy."

Moody felt the blade press harder into the back of his neck and thought he was done for, that was until he realised what was happening. Matilda slipped off her invisibility cloak about three feet in front of him. She spoke to the general area she knew he was.

"Mad Eye, Potter has been in that toilet for twenty minutes. Albus warned us not to let him out of our sight, do you want me to go in there and find out what's happening? These Grangers made a fool of me once, no way the muggles are getting a second chance at it."

A bolt of light shot out from behind Moody and hit Matilda on the forehead, she flipped around in a somersault and hit the ground hard.

"This is the order's last warning Mad Eye, those muggles are my family. You said you were entitled to stand here, I am entitled to protect my family and will. She's the witch who spied on them in France before stealing Hermione's letter, remind her of that when she wakes up."

Moody felt the blade withdraw from his neck but still didn't move. It was only when he saw Potter join his friends in the restaurant that he grabbed Matilda and used his portkey to get them both the hell out of there.

-oOoOo-

Albus appeared to be rushing toward the Hogwarts infirmary a lot lately, it was lucky Poppy was here for a few days getting her domain ready for the new term. He arrived to find a sobbing witch laying on a bed, Matilda was inconsolable.

"Albus, how can I show my face anywhere like this? Everyone will know what this mark is, and who gave it to me. What am I going to do about my job? I wouldn't even get past the security desk at the ministry, far less reach my department."

He didn't get a chance to answer as the staccato rhythm beat by Alastor's peg leg reverberated around the room, Albus soon had a face full of the wizened ex-auror. "Potter said he warned you to keep the order away from him, don't you think that's information we should have bloody known about? Keeping things from a schoolboy is one thing, withholding vital information from operatives on a mission is criminal Albus."

Dumbledore was shocked by this new development. "I didn't mention it because I couldn't believe the boy was serious about it."

Moody raged at his old friend. "Harry Potter now classes your order the same as Voldemort's death eaters and you didn't think it was worth mentioning? Albus, that lad is probably the most serious individual I've ever met."

Dumbledore couldn't hide his involuntary shudder. "I've always feared the boy turning dark, after what's happened today..."

Moody cut him off. "Potter's not dark, if anyone can recognise a dark wizard then it's me. The lad had me cold, he could have killed me and I wouldn't even have known who did it. He got close enough to put a blade on me, and I've still yet to see him."

Albus struggled to comprehend what his friend was telling him. "He got the drop on you?"

"Yes, and promised more of the same to anyone else we send."

Matilda was getting the distinct impression she was being forgotten about here. "What about me? How can he get away with doing this to me over some muggles?"

It was Moody who answered. "We had his family under observation, he could have done a lot worse. He also knows it was you stole his girl's letter."

The now scarred witch was incensed. "You mean I got this over some muggleborn's love letter? Surely there's a law against that? I want him punished."

Moody studied the witch now sitting on the bed before turning to speak with Dumbledore. "Is it any wonder Potter wants to leave the magical world? We're supposed to be the good guys yet spout rubbish like that. I guarantee you Potter isn't dark, I can also guarantee you he'll kill anyone who tries to harm the Grangers. Going anywhere near that girl is a death sentence, I'm glad I survived and am going to celebrate that fact by getting drunk." Moody made his way out the infirmary as Matilda once more asked her question.

"But what about me?"

Albus was forced to accept responsibility for what had happened. "Matilda, I will do my utmost to find you a cure for this. The Harry Potter I knew was not a vindictive person, I'm sure we'll come up with something. Your scar proves this is not a case of accidental magic, if it's a curse then there may be a counter for it. We will see this reversed Matilda, I'll try to get an answer as soon as possible."

It was Poppy who pointed out the obvious to the headmaster. "Albus, sending anyone from the order anywhere near Harry is madness. Only a fool pokes a sleeping dragon."

"I agree Poppy, that is why I was going to ask someone else to go. I'll try to get some answers today."

-oOoOo-

Harry and Hermione spent the evening being introduced to people he didn't know or she hadn't seen in years, they were literally having to grin and bear it. For Hermione, watching as some of the girls she went to primary school with fawned over her ring and her Harry stuck in her craw.

At least when Lavender did the exact same thing earlier, her interest and congratulations had been genuine. That the Potter family engagement ring would probably see its own article in Teen Witch Weekly was alright with Hermione, it was at least interesting and better than some of the stuff she could mention.

Their friends spent the night running interference for them. Whenever they appeared to have been cornered by particularly boring company, a rescue party would soon appear and the engaged couple could escape for now.

The only thing that kept them both going was the ear to ear smile on Emma Granger's face. Hermione understood her mother had dreamed of being able to show her real daughter to their friends, this though was so much better. Hermione sparkled, and not just because of the Potter diamonds. Facing some of her childhood tormentors with Harry at her side eased those experiences from her psyche. They were still there but no longer possessed the power to hurt. Harry thought she was beautiful and, though even she might disagree with that, his was the only opinion that mattered to her.

Dobby and Winky had the garden looking magnificent, their placement of thousands of twinkling lights added that special touch. They had also rather carelessly not hidden bits of cable, this to fool anyone looking too closely at what were in effect magical lights. These lights were also charmed to repel all flying insects, this would ensure their guests enjoyed a pest free evening and Rita couldn't show up unannounced. The entire garden glittered like an enchanted grotto in the warm August evening.

The two elves had also prepared all the food and set up a sumptuous buffet that never appeared to run out, invisible hands topping up whenever it became necessary. Dan was behind a bar though the correct bottle always appeared to find its way directly into his hand. The party was a stunning success.

That Cynthia had to be reminded to breathe when she saw the Potter diamonds was a particularly good moment for her mum, Emma Granger would have put a Cheshire cat to shame after witnessing that.

It was actually a welcome relief when Professor McGonagall appeared and asked for a private word with the couple. Hermione



led them up to Harry's room for a bit of privacy, escape was the word she was thinking though.

"Harry and Hermione, I'm so sorry for interrupting your party. If I had known..."

"In all honesty professor, it's my parents' party. We just happen to be the guests of honour. We intend to have a proper party when Luna returns from her trip, and before Hogwarts starts. Watch out for your invitation."

"Thank you both for that." Minerva now felt her task was even more difficult. "A request was made of me to come here and ask a question. Is there any way that curse can be lifted on the young woman who was spying on you today? I in no way condone her actions but neither she nor Alastor knew you had specifically warned the order to stay away. Albus, in his infinite wisdom, never bothered to tell them."

That last bit was hardly a shocking revelation to any of them, Hermione couldn't hide her sarcasm. "So it's not just Harry he doesn't tell things he needs to know then?"

Minerva agreed wholeheartedly but that wasn't why she was here. "The girl works in the ministry and will be unable to work until the scar has healed. Everyone would know it came from you and the only other person to have such a scar is Voldemort. As you are well aware, people will jump to their own conclusions."

Harry's sarcasm was also pretty obvious. "It would have been nice if people had been a bit more concerned about my scar. Instead of dumping me on a doorstep and leaving me to grow up thinking I got it in the car crash that killed my mother and father."

He had to take a deep breath and remind himself that he wasn't angry with McGonagall. As usual, Dumbledore was just getting someone else to clean up his mess. "Professor, I'm sure by now Madam Pomfrey has discovered the scar can't be treated by potions or spells. The cure in fact is very simple. The person cursed has to recognise what they did wrong and be truly sorry for it. Meaningless apologies won't do, they have to change before the magic will stop and allow them to heal."

Minerva was confused, she thought this was too easy and asked for confirmation. "Harry, what did she actually do that she has to change? If you could be a bit more specific, it would help."

Harry was disappointed that he had to explain this to her when it was so obvious to them. "Professor, what would her punishment be if she spied on a pureblood home and stole their mail? I understand Mr Weasley could have had the two at the Burrow arrested?"

Minerva never got a chance to answer as Hermione beat her to it. "You were about to point out that it was a muggle home and therein lays our problem. You are undoubtedly a highly educated and well respected figure in the magical community. That you can accept there are different laws dependant on your circumstances of birth is an alien concept to us. Neither Harry nor I will ever accept that."

Harry supported his fiancée fully. "She might not have broken any current British magical laws but she certainly broke quite a few muggle ones. Magical people don't seem too bothered with those though. Until she can accept how wrong she was, and be truly sorry for it, the scar will remain."

He felt Hermione's arm slip around his waist to offer comfort and support. "People are people professor, all different yet all the same. I didn't need five years of Hogwarts to teach me that. In fact, Hogwarts promotes quite the opposite. The number of times I had to listen to pureblood nonsense being spouted and nothing was ever done to stop it, Snape actually encourages it."

Minerva could now see the scale of the problem. "Harry, you're expecting someone to change the way they think about everything. A lifetime's teachings can't be wiped out overnight. Do you think that's fair?"

Harry was shaking his head in disbelief. "I could have killed them both, and left the bodies to rot under their invisibility cloaks. Do you think that would be fairer? I told Dumbledore I now consider the order the same as death eaters, it's not my fault the old fool didn't pass on the message."

Minerva appeared horrified at this but Harry continued speaking. "I would obviously rather not kill anyone if I can help it. I'm assuming that scar will ensure the rest of the order gets the message."

The fire in his eyes and passion in his voice told Minerva everything she needed to know. Alastor had said Harry could have killed him and he wouldn't have even known who did it, she'd never seen her old friend so rattled.

"I'll pass on the message Harry. I for one am glad you didn't kill anyone."

"Professor, you don't have to look any further than Voldemort to see where hate can lead you. Hermione and I have a whole different future planned for ourselves. Please don't think I wouldn't take serious action should anyone put that future in jeopardy."

Minerva wouldn't stay and attend the party. She did take a dram from Dan to toast the happy couple, after that discussion she needed it. Minerva wondered how her news would be received back in the castle.

Harry and Hermione rejoined the party and were quickly sought out by a Ginny who was practically glowing. Both could remember the fight Ginny had put up when Hermione had suggested buying the pale green party dress she was currently wearing. The little redhead had been adamant she would never go anywhere to wear something so fine. She'd been turning the heads of the few young men who were there. She really was a beautiful girl who was changing into a stunning young woman, tonight had been an important stepping stone on that journey.

Once Ron had calmed down from the first time he'd laid eyes on his young sister, he hadn't let her out of his sight all evening. Ginny would normally have rebelled at this but tonight was a whole new experience for her. She was actually pleased to have her brother watching out for her, just as long as he knew she wouldn't put up with that when they went back to Hogwarts.

"Guys, the twins sent an engagement present for you both with Ron. It's a fireworks display to end the night. Remus and Tonks have offered to set them off and the twins promised there is nothing too elaborate in there. I've a feeling they will be going all out for your magical engagement party."

Both thought that fireworks would be the perfect way to end the evening, nothing says it's time to go home like setting off some rockets.

Ginny though wasn't quite finished. "Mum said she would love to have the party at the new Burrow. Ron just told me mum spoke to the builder today and promised an invite for him and his wife if he gets it finished in time. Ron said he's never seen a man so motivated in his life."

Both couldn't help but smile at the image that portrayed. "Tell your mum that Harry and I would love to have it at the new Burrow."

Harry added his own bit. "Tell Ron thanks for passing that on, we really appreciate it."

All three glanced over to the buffet where Ron was standing with Lavender attached, it was unspoken but understood why he didn't tell them himself.

The fireworks were spectacular, generating loads of oh's and aw's, and ending a perfect evening. Harry thought having a dragon firework that breathed flame might be a bit too much. When that flame became a heart containing the initials H and Hr, everyone burst into cheering and loud applause. The guests all just accepted that firework technology was moving at the same pace as everything else.

Emma had marvelled at the fireworks display, leaning back onto Dan while his arms had wrapped around her from behind. As she watched Harry and Hermione's initials eventually fade from the night sky, she didn't think tonight could have gone any better. That was until Cynthia Payne Smith approached her again.

"Emma dear, you simply must tell me where you got those fabulous fireworks from? They would be sensational at my Felicity's birthday party. Hermione is of course invited but I suspect she'll be back at that boarding school of hers by then."

"Yes, Hermione will be heading back to Scotland come September. Harry's actually bought a house up there to be closer to her. As to the fireworks, I'm sorry but I can't help you. Harry actually owns part of the company that makes them and they were a gift for their

engagement. The two young men who design them are nothing short of geniuses."

Cynthia's nose appeared to be put even further out of joint. "Oh, so you know them then?"

"Oh yes, we just holidayed with their entire family in the South of France. That's where Harry proposed to Hermione, it was so romantic! All their friends joined us over there at some point during our holiday, the villa was always busy."

As a thoroughly disappointed and dejected Cynthia left, Dan kissed the nape of her neck. "You just took a few facts and painted a totally different picture. How can you call Harry's proposal romantic? The two of us were there and ready for bed."

"You ask our daughter if she thought it was romantic, I bet I know the answer you'll receive."

Dan had no reply to that so Emma continued. "Her delightful daughter was one of the group who tormented Hermione, you have no idea how much I enjoyed rubbing her nose in it tonight." This earned her another kiss but Emma was on a roll.

"Watching our little girl in Harry's arms, surrounded by their friends is a dream come true for me Dan. That a lot of the people who made her life difficult when she was growing up were here to see that just adds to the occasion. Our Hermione is the first of her peers to get engaged, and to a wonderful young man too. Between them they plan to quietly change the world, and I for one believe they'll do it."

She snuggled further back into her husband, "Just look at them Dan, when have you ever seen two people so in love and perfect for one another. I don't think I've been happier, or hornier. I need a big strong man to take me to bed."

Dan practically growled his answer. "I think I can arrange that. We can tidy-up in the morning."

"Or we could let Dobby and Winky handle that while we have a lie-in?"

Harry and Hermione were too busy saying goodnight to everyone, they never noticed Dan practically drag a giggling Emma into the house.

-oOoOo-

That Teen Witch Weekly was going to feature their engagement party was never in any doubt. What surprised the four people at the Granger breakfast table that Saturday morning was the entire tone of the piece. The revelations in the Prophet obviously had an effect on Lavender. She also knew Harry well enough to understand the last thing he would want was people's pity. The headline established the article's tone right from the off.

Harry Potter finds love

Like many who read the revelations on the boy who lived's life, I wept tears for the young wizard I've shared classes and a common room with for the last five years. In all this time though, I've never seen him happier than he was on Thursday evening. It was at a party held at his fiancée's parents' home to celebrate their engagement.

Events in his life may have conspired to see our saviour leave us to continue his life in another direction. We can only hope that, by the time their children are eleven, things will have changed enough to see Potters once more grace the corridors and classrooms of Hogwarts.

Hermione's eyebrows were almost disappearing into her hairline, and not just at the children comment. She couldn't believe the same girl she shared a dorm with for five years had written this. The editor was obviously pleased with their magazine's newest journalist, Lavender's article now rated her picture beside it.

Normal service was soon resumed though as Lavender went on to describe Hermione's engagement ring in minute and glowing detail. Hermione herself then received the same treatment, from her sun-lightened hairstyle to her Gucci sandals. The only part of the article that rang any alarm bells was where Lavender pointed out that the Grangers were a fairly wealthy family, both healers working and living in a large house in Crawley.

They understood what Lavender was trying to achieve here, dispel any suggestion that Hermione was only after Harry because he was one of the wealthiest wizards in Britain. While it was doubtful that Voldemort subscribed to Teen Witch Weekly, they would still rather not have any mention of the Grangers' location appearing in the press. All in all though, their reaction to the article was a positive one.

-oOoOo-

With Luna away on holiday, Neville was spending more time at home with his parents. Ginny and Ron were also press-ganged into helping as the work on the new Burrow progressed at speed. This was why Harry and Hermione found themselves walking through Crawley, doing a bit of shopping before meeting Dan and Emma for lunch.

Not for the first time today, they bumped into some people who were at their party last night. They were standing chatting before Harry suddenly stiffened. "Hermione, we need to go. Your mum and dad are expecting us."

Hermione understood at once what was happening and grabbed his hand as the couple began running along the street. "Oh Harry no, not mum and dad."

Harry tried to reassure her without slackening their pace. "Hermione, I've got Dobby there guarding them. The wards only tickled, the little guy has probably taken some action to protect them. The building is not under attack."

She squeezed his hand in thanks and relief but still kept running, they were only about a hundred yards away.

-oOoOo-

The Granger dental practice was in the town square. It was above a shop selling teenage fashion and accessed by a different door onto the street. This door currently had the undivided attention of a disillusioned Draco Malfoy. He was on a rooftop across the square, his broom also rendered invisible. Draco was sweating under his death eater garb and a cooling charm wouldn't relieve the perspiration. The thought of returning to the dark lord and informing

him the plan had failed had his stomach churning and his entire body sweating like a pig.

Crabbe and Goyle were supposed to go in there and fire off some curses, how could they mess that up? This was supposed to bring Potter and his mudblood running. Draco's job was to signal when their targets had arrived but that was beginning to look increasingly unlikely. Where was the shouting and screaming of terrorised muggles that Draco looked forward to so much?

From his position, he could actually see into one of the windows as Granger's parents did something to a fat muggle's mouth. They then shoo'd him out the door and Draco could see no sign of any panic whatsoever, watching two muggle Grangers kiss was not his idea of a good afternoon's entertainment.

Draco was getting ready to withdraw when he spotted his two targets running along the street. It was more relief than elation Draco felt as they almost collided with the leaving fat muggle before racing up the stairs. He wasn't about to take any chances, they were in the building and that was good enough for him. It was time for action, Draco lifted his sleeve and pressed the tip of his wand into his dark mark.

The sound of a dozen death eaters apparating in front of the building halted shoppers who stood and watched this strangely dressed group. In a well practiced move, the death eaters each cast the explosive curse that Wormtail had used so effectively all those years ago. They didn't aim directly at the upper story, rather concentrating their fire on the shop below. The premises, and anyone in it, were pulverised and the upper building collapsed into the large hole left behind. Wormtail cast the dark mark and then they quickly apparated out of there, leaving death and destruction behind.

Draco mounted his broom and attempted to fly closer for a better look. He now had all the screaming and panic he could ever wish for as bodies lay strewn in the square, stricken from falling masonry and flying glass. There was also unfortunately a large cloud of dust spreading out from the destruction, dust that would make Draco visible if he hung about any longer.

He wondered if Crabbe and Goyle managed to activate their portkeys before the building was destroyed? If not, then they died



hero's deaths for a noble cause. Draco was forced to fly away but he wasn't too disappointed, there wasn't a cat in hell's chance of anyone who was inside that building surviving. The boy who lived had met his match. He'd made his decision that first day when he refused to shake Draco Malfoy's hand, dropping a building on him was a fitting end. Potter wanted to bury himself in the muggle world and Draco was happy to help make that wish come true.

A/N Thanks for reading

The football team I've supported for almost half a century have reached the Scottish Cup Final for only the second time in all those years. We're massive underdogs but that won't stop me and my family going to a packed Hampden Park this Saturday and shouting our lungs out. Win or lose, my posting schedule is bound to go to pot as my nerves build while our date with destiny approaches. Since my team play in Gryffindor colours and the opposition Slytherin, I'm obviously hoping the Potter influence works for us. My next post will be chapter 12 of No Hurry, just no chance of saying when that will be. I can only promise not to kill everyone off if we get beat.

Robert

## Chapter 12

Amelia stood back and observed as the muggles dealt with the devastation. She was very impressed at how the different branches of their emergency services all worked together in ferrying the injured off to hospital. There was even a helicopter hovering overhead and armed police guarding the rescuers.

They were treating this as a terrorist attack and guarding against a secondary strike, her aurors were rendered helpless and ordered not to intervene. With the arrival of the minister, her day just got worse.

"Amelia, why aren't the obliviators taking action here? Your inaction is risking exposure of our world."

The head of the DMLE was in no mood to listen to shit like that, she'd watched as young female bodies were gently and respectfully carried from the rubble. "I'm not the one who turned up here in death eater robes, before firing off curses to destroy a muggle building." Their privacy charm stopped anyone else from hearing Amelia but she still lowered her voice before continuing.

"Apart from the fact that hundreds of people saw exactly what happened, some of them were injured and some had scattered before we even got here, there is a far more serious problem."

Cornelius wasn't interested. "I don't care if they're injured, I want them obliterated at once."

"Minister, that would create more problems than it would solve. Just from standing here, I can see three remote cameras that would have recorded the entire incident."

Fudge thought the answer was simple. "Destroy them then?"

Amelia was aware very few in the magical world knew anything about muggle technology, she prided herself on keeping abreast of anything that helped in her job. As that job frequently brought her into contact with the muggle world, she learned everything she could from aurors with muggle connections and took to reading their newspapers on a Sunday. "That wouldn't do any good Cornelius, these cameras don't contain any film. The pictures are recorded at

another location, a location that could be anywhere within a few miles of here."

It wasn't hard to see the minister thought this was impossible, she explained her reasoning for merely observing. "If we leave the situation alone then the muggles will treat it for what it was, a terrorist attack. Should witnesses suddenly begin telling a different story to the one the pictures show, they will quickly suspect someone has interfered."

She indicated the large vehicles with big dishes on their roofs. "This entire situation is now being watched live in millions of muggle homes the length and breadth of the country."

"Surely that's not possible?"

"Cornelius, by dinner time tonight these images will be all around the world. There were young people shopping here that were casually and callously murdered, I counted four of them carried from the rubble already. This is not going to be contained by a few obliviates."

Now that the situation was fully explained, Amelia pushed the minister to take the next logical step. "I recommend contacting the muggle government. It would be much better for us if you told them what was happening before they figured it out for themselves."

Fudge didn't like that idea so changed the subject. "Do we have any idea why the death eaters chose here? I'm assuming an attack of this ferocity wasn't just a random occurrence."

"You're correct minister, the upper part of the building was the workplace of Hermione Granger's parents. You'll know her as the girl who slapped Dumbledore and just got engaged to Harry Potter."

The implications of that hit Fudge like a physical blow. "Do we know if they were in there? Was Potter in there?"

"We don't know, and have no way of finding out at the moment. Anyone approaching that site is going to have cameras and guns trained on them. There is still too much dust in the air for invisibility cloaks to be effective."

She now gave him the information she knew he would hate. "We got here just in time to cancel the dark mark and discover there were two magical bodies under all that rubble. The muggle authorities have a lot of experience in dealing with terrorists and very quickly had the site locked down. They are on high alert and I refuse to risk auror lives for the sake of information that will appear on the muggle news within hours."

As Fudge watched the people Amelia said had these gun things, he was forced to agree. Their entire demeanour screamed that they wouldn't hold back if they felt threatened.

"I have posted people at the morgue and the hospital, they'll contact me the instant they have any information."

This shook Fudge more than the devastation in front of them, the thought of Harry Potter in the morgue had his mind in a spin. "You really think I should contact the muggle Prime Minister?"

Amelia released a sigh of relief, Fudge was actually taking her advice for once. "Yes, tell him about Voldemort's return and who the target was here today. It wouldn't do any harm to tell him that we've already permanently stopped some of these terrorists and have more in prison. Mentioning the massive bounty on their leader's head wouldn't go wrong either, ensure they know how serious we're taking this problem."

Fudge could plainly see the advice Amelia was giving him should be followed, and quickly. Being able to honestly inform the Prime Minister of the sheer scale of the manhunt under way should contain the problem. The knowledge that there would soon be pictures of British death eaters being shown around the world terrified him into action. He couldn't afford not to do something, not if he wanted to stay as minister.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was only a few steps up the staircase when she began shouting for her mum and dad. Bursting into the waiting room, she spotted them coming out one of the treatment rooms. The now crying witch threw herself at her shocked parents.

Pleased as he was to see Dan and Emma ok, it was someone else Harry was desperate to see. "Dobby!"

The little elf faded into view, as did two restrained wizards that were instantly recognisable to Harry. The expressions of terror on Crabbe and Goyle's faces was way more than being confronted by Harry Potter could account for. Their fear was broadcasting their thoughts and Harry didn't need to be a skilled legitimist to realise this was a trap.

"Potter portkey emergency!"

The master command embedded into Dan and Emma's watches and Hermione's owl necklace activated the portkeys instantly, all three disappeared from the room. Harry was about to order Dobby to take these two away before he himself would leave and try to reverse the trap. Unfortunately, the room chose that precise second to explode around him.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was screaming Harry's name as all three Grangers found themselves in an elegant room they'd never laid eyes on before.

Dan grabbed his daughter by the shoulders to get her attention. "Hermione, what the hell just happened and who were those two boys in our waiting room? What's going on here?"

Hermione's emotions were all over the place as she tried to answer her parents. "We know those two from school and they could only have been there to do you harm. Harry had Dobby protecting you but I think we ran into a trap. Dobby, Winky."

It was a rather distraught Winky who appeared. "Oh mistress, master Harry and Dobby are at your house injured. What should Winky do?"

"Take me to them Winky."

Dan wasn't standing for that. "Hermione no, think for a second. If they could find the practice, perhaps they've also found the house?"

Emma quickly knelt beside the little elf. "Winky, can you bring them both here without further injuring them?"

They took her answer to be yes since she just disappeared. She was soon back with a bleeding Harry and a barely conscious Dobby.

Both appeared to have gone three rounds with an angry hippogriff but Dobby told his story before blacking out. "Master Harry was hit on head by bit of roof. Wards held just long enough for Dobby to get him out."

All three Grangers could see Dobby was in severe pain before he passed out, Harry was bleeding from a wound in his head and already unconscious. Dan was examining Harry while Emma and Winky were helping Dobby. Hermione had shot off looking for the kitchen or a bathroom, returning with some warm water and towels. Harry was a bloody mess and would need to be cleaned up before they could tell the extent of the damage.

Dobby had a blanket to keep him warm and a pillow under his head by the time Hermione returned.

"How's Harry doing dad?"

"He's took a nasty blow to the head, probably concussed too. We should really take him to hospital and have a doctor look at it. Winky, where are we at the moment?"

"We is in master Harry's house in Glasgow."

Hermione was washing the blood off Harry, he'd been hit on the right side of his head and had a nasty gash above his ear that defiantly needed stitches. "Winky, do you know if magic can be detected in this house?"

"Master Harry fixed it so no one would know magic was in house."

Hermione had her wand out and both parents watched on in amazement as she concentrated on healing Harry's wound.

"Hermione, that was brilliant! Can you help heal Dobby?"

"That's about the extent of my healing mum, cuts and broken bones. I know some spells but wouldn't like to attempt them on Dobby. Make him comfortable for now and Harry will heal him when he recovers."

Dan was now glancing around the beautiful room, the impression was of a lovely old building that had been really taken care of. Dan had no way of knowing the amount of work Dobby and Winky had done to get their master's house to this standard. He spotted a large TV in the corner and switched it on.

"Dan, what are you doing? This is hardly the time to watch the telly."

"Emma, if death eaters just carried out an attack on Crawley town centre, don't you think it will be on the news?"

Hermione was carefully levitating Harry onto one of the comfortable looking sofas. She sat at one end of it before gently lowering Harry so his head rested on her lap. "Dad, if the death eaters attacked, you can bet the ministry will be there obliterating the shit out of everyone. It will probably be featured as a gas explosion or something like that."

Emma couldn't hide her ire. "I just watched you heal a wound on Harry that would have needed stitched. Are you telling me all the ministry is going to do is use magic to make sure people don't remember how they were injured? Couldn't they use the same magic you did and heal some of them?"

The bitterness in Hermione's voice was unmistakable. "They could mum, but they won't. Certainly not for muggles, any magical people injured will find themselves whisked off to St Mungo's."

Emma was about to set off on a rant when she came to an abrupt halt.

Harry apparently hadn't skimmed on the services and Dan had found Sky News. The presenter was announcing breaking news about an explosion in Crawley. There were unconfirmed reports it might be terrorist related and they would bring more as soon as they got it. Very early reports indicated there certainly were casualties and fatalities couldn't be ruled out at this point.

This ended all conversation as the three of them were engrossed in the unfolding nightmare. Dan and Emma sat on the other sofa with their arms around each other, both struggling to come to terms with what happened today. It was to their great credit that their main focus wasn't on the attempt made on their life, nor the fact the two dentists may no longer have a business. It was more on the people who didn't have an outstanding young man to provide them with emergency portkeys. Dan and Emma had spent their adult lives, living and working in Crawley. They probably knew a lot of the people who would have been on the street today when the attack took place.

Winky served them tea but her delicious sandwiches were ignored, no one felt like eating at the moment.

"Winky, How's Dobby doing?" With Harry on her lap, Hermione couldn't check on the elf.

"Dobby is resting mistress, I've given him some healing broth and he will sleep. Elves heal faster than witches and wizards, Dobby is very strong. Being bonded to Master Harry helps, master is powerful wizard."

"Harry is a powerful wizard who owes his life to Dobby. He saved him and brought my Harry back to me, I'm very proud of both of you Winky."

The little elf watched her mistress lovingly cradle master's head, gently playing with his unruly hair. Winky loved her new family and would be having words with Dobby when he was better. This would be a wonderful family to raise little elves in.

There were sharp intakes of breath as Sky began beaming live images from Crawley. Emilie's clothes shop and their dental practice were now nothing more than a large pile of rubble. Dan glanced from his watch to the young man currently lying on his daughter's lap. No words were needed or spoken but all three Grangers had tears in their eyes as they watched the story unfold.

-oOoOo-

Fudge had demanded information on Potter as quickly as possible, that was why Amelia found herself once more knocking on this



cottage door. She was hoping the couple had some way of contacting Harry, assuming he was still alive to be contacted.

Tonks answered the door and her heart sank. All aurors knew the look Amelia had on her face, it meant she was here to deliver bad news. She could only think of one thing. "Amelia please, not my mum and dad?"

"They're fine Tonks, I really need to speak to you and Remus."

Tonks suddenly felt Remus appear at her side, he'd felt her distress and was there for her.

Amelia wasted no time, the instant they were inside, she told them the reason for her visit. "The Grangers' place of work was attacked and destroyed by a large group of death eaters today."

Tonks immediately had her arms around Remus, she knew Harry was very important to her man. It was also only a few days to the full moon and the wolf was near the surface.

"It was a busy street around lunchtime, there has been many casualties and even some fatalities. The muggle emergency services were there only moments after the attack and we couldn't contain the situation. At the moment we don't even know if Harry or any of the Grangers were in there, have you any way of contacting them?"

Remus was grateful for the comforting arms holding him. Next to Tonks, Harry was the most important person in his life. Hermione and her family were pretty special people to. Thinking of them triggered a memory of the Burrow from earlier in the summer. "Winky, Dobby!"

Winky appeared with an apology on her lips. "Sorry but Dobby can't come at the moment, what can Winky do for Master Harry's friends?"

Remus got straight to the heart of the matter. "Winky, is Harry and the Grangers ok? Where are they?"

"Master Harry is injured but mistress is looking after him. Sorry but Winky can't tell anyone where master's house is. Winky must go now and look after her family."

The relief in the cottage at the elf's words was immense, Remus had no intention of delaying her from looking after her family. "Thank you Winky, I know you'll take great care of them. Could you ask Harry or Hermione to contact us whenever they can."

Tonks noticed the relief in her boss's entire demeanour at the news Harry and Hermione were alive. "Is there something you're not telling us Amelia?"

"We haven't been able to get access to the site though we did trace two magical bodies under the rubble. Obviously we feared they were Harry and Hermione. The death eaters blasted out the building below and the entire structure collapsed in on itself. I doubt they will find survivors from either premises."

Tonks suddenly had a thought. "Someone needs to tell the Weasleys and Longbottoms before they find out by other means. Luna's away on holiday."

Amelia agreed but asked if they could do it. "I'm having the Granger house guarded and expect the muggle authorities to be there soon."

Tonks agreed to go since Remus wasn't up to company at the moment.

Amelia was relieved that, like her last visit here, she left a lot happier than she arrived.

-oOoOo-

There were seven Weasleys and a girlfriend sitting down to dinner in Grimmauld Place, Bill and Charlie having to return to work. Molly was about to invite Tonks to join them when she sensed this wasn't a social call. This ominous feeling spread along the entire table as they waited to hear what she had to say.

"Death eaters attacked Dan and Emma's dental surgery today, they destroyed it totally. They all got out but Harry and Dobby are injured, that's all we know at the moment."

The table was silent but that was never going to last for long with the Weasley tribe. When the explosion came though, it was a lot more violent than anyone expected. Ginny sprang across the table and started punching Lavender.

"Stupid! Nosey! Bitch!" Each word was emphasised with a punch to Lavender's face before many hands grabbed her and Ginny was physically lifted off the table. It took Fred, George and Percy to hold the little firebrand away from Lavender, and even then it was a struggle. They may be stopping Ginny hitting her brother's girlfriend but they couldn't stop her saying what was on her mind.

"This is your fault you bitch, you did everything but provide the death eaters with a map! I hope you think it was worth getting your picture in the magazine?"

Molly was recovering from the shock of Tonks' news and screamed at her daughter. "Ginny, stop this at once. You don't know that."

Lavender had her head buried in Ron's chest and crying buckets, Ginny though was in no mood to be merciful. "Oh I think we all know who's to blame. She was only there because Harry and Hermione didn't want to upset Ron. If Harry's badly injured, Hermione will come after her."

Arthur checked Lavender and healed her burst lip before speaking to his youngest son. "Ron, perhaps you better take Lavender home."

Ginny had a parting comment for Teen Witch Weekly's newest reporter as she left. "I hope your house has strong wards Lavender, I'll bet I'm not the only one who'll blame you."

Tonks thought Ginny was right on all counts. She would contact Amelia about an auror guard for the Browns' home before the story broke.

Ron helped a distraught Lavender into the fireplace, it was only after she flooded away that Ginny stopped struggling against her three elder brothers.

-oOoOo-

Harry woke slowly, the soothing hand on his brow helping with his headache. He found himself looking into the tearful brown eyes of his fiancée. "Hello love, is everyone ok? What happened?"

The tears started falling, Harry guessed these were not the first tears Hermione had cried today. "A dozen death eaters appeared in the street and blasted the building out of existence. So far, there are eight confirmed deaths and the four of us are listed as missing."

The TV had been on with the volume very low in deference to Harry's condition. Now that he was conscious, Dan turned it up and Harry's attention was immediately drawn to it. The rather large man that he and Hermione had passed at the entrance to the Grangers' surgery was being interviewed. He was currently claiming to be the luckiest man in the world. As he was speaking, they switched the video feed to show CCTV footage of the death eaters arriving from nowhere and destroying the building. The footage wasn't exactly broadcast quality and obviously wasn't filmed in real time. It was more like a series of photographs stitched together like a bad attempt at animation.

These photographs also didn't record magic spells so how these terrorists had carried out their attack was a mystery. What wasn't a mystery was who cast the final spell, probably the dark mark. The silver hand holding the wand told Harry everything he needed to know,

The audio had continued with the interview and the video feed now matched. The devastation visible over Dan's last patient's shoulder, and the previous footage, really cemented his lucky claim. Had he been a minute later leaving his dental appointment, he would have been buried under the rubble and most likely dead.

"How did I get here?"

"You were hit on the head but Dobby managed to get you both back to our house. Winky then delivered the two of you here. Dobby was also injured but Winky is taking good care of him. Apparently house elves heal quickly so they can still serve their master, a master who probably injured them in the first place."

Hermione took a deep, calming breath. "Sorry Harry, right sentiments but wrong time and place. I know you would never

mistreat anyone, far less two elves who worship you. Oh, and we're in your house in Glasgow."

"Yes, that's where your emergency portkeys are set to bring you. I'm so glad I activated them, it was only seconds later the building collapsed. I assume Crabbe and Goyle didn't make it out? I would like to have asked them where Draco was, neither of those two can take a piss without his permission."

Harry glanced over to the other sofa where Emma appeared to be in tiny pieces, Dan on the other hand looked ready to take on Voldemort himself with nothing more than a cricket bat. "Are you guys ok?"

It was perhaps a stupid question but Dan answered it anyway. "No Harry, we're not. These bastards came after my family and I've spent the last few hours watching people we know being interviewed or led into ambulances."

Dan made a conscious attempt to soften his voice, Harry was the last person he wanted to be angry with. "Only your gift of watches and Hermione's necklace kept us from being buried under tons of rubble. This last few hours has been like sitting and watching your own obituary, how are we going to be able to return?"

Hermione offered a suggestion. "Should we return? It might be better if we wait until someone becomes rich by offing Voldemort."

The scene on the news had switched to one recorded earlier where some injured were being taken to hospital, Harry's decision was made.

"I'm going back. Voldemort is undoubtedly celebrating right now, I intend to spoil his party." His voice then took on an ominous quality. "Discovering I'm still alive might even see him kill a few of those who failed him today, save me the trouble."

No one in the room doubted Harry was serious in his conviction to make these death eaters pay.

-oOoOo-

The sergeant assigned the front desk of the Crawley police station thought he'd seen everything today, that was until his dentist walked in the door.

"Oh my god! Dan and Emma, am I glad to see you both. They're currently searching through the rubble for your bodies. How the hell did you get out of there?"

"That's a long story Bob, and not one we want to share at the front desk."

Sergeant Bob Macintosh nodded in understanding while his hand reached for the phone.

Harry's earlier prediction proved to be remarkably accurate. The four were led into an interview room while they waited on the police who would ask them the awkward questions. When the two men arrived, they had barely sat down when Amelia Bones entered.

Harry had predicted there was no way the ministry of magic wanted the answering questions and they would arrange any cover-up needed.

Amelia pulled some sort of ID out of her pocket before speaking. "I'm sorry gentlemen but this falls under my department's jurisdiction. This interview is over."

One of the two men sitting then took out his own ID and proceeded to shock everyone there. "I'm sorry Madam Bones but I think you'll find I outrank you on this matter."

Amelia was flabbergasted and appeared ready to reach for her wand when the man held up his hand in the universal sign for stop. "Your minister spoke to the prime minister, this led to John and I being dispatched to Crawley. Since John here would be considered a squib, as was my father, we are both well aware that the death eaters target today was Mr Potter here."

His partner explained their situation. "Our task is to work with you, the purpose being to ensure our country doesn't face another Crawley. Our government wants this problem dealt with quickly and we have a lot of resources that can be brought to bear on the matter."

As Amelia was the one who suggested Fudge contact the muggles, she could hardly turn down their help now. She should have surmised they wouldn't be content to just sit back and let them handle the situation. They had dead children on their hands, of course they were going to take action.

"My name is Steve Kirk, this is John Adams. You don't need to know what department we work for, just that we're on the same side here."

John took out his notebook. "We want to discover what really happened today and then we'll need your help to organise the Grangers' miracle survival. Only the sergeant at the desk has spoken to them, I assume you've already taken care of that issue?"

Amelia had the good grace to look embarrassed, she'd already obliterated that knowledge from the muggle on the way in.

Harry and Hermione told the story, including recognising Peter Pettigrew from the TV.

Steve gave his assessment of the situation. "You said those two lads were no more than muscle? They were probably sent in there to get your attention, disposable assets. I would guess they were having the place watched for your arrival, considering how closely the attack came after you entered the building."

Everyone agreed with that, it also answered another question Harry had. "I wondered where Malfoy was, I didn't recognise him amongst the attackers."

Hermione couldn't disagree with Harry's conclusion. She knew that Crabbe and Goyle's presence guaranteed Draco's involvement.

Amelia asked for photographs of the attackers, promising anyone recognised would be arrested and interviewed using truth serum. There would soon be aurors heading for the homes of Crabbe and Goyle.

-oOoOo-

The mood around the site of the disaster suddenly skyrocketed as whispers began to circulate about survivors being rescued from

under the wreckage. When four figures wrapped in emergency blankets emerged from behind the police cordon, the cheering and clapping from the watchers and workers was thunderous.

All four had their clothes and appearance altered to appear as if they had spent hours trapped underground. Dan was thankful for this as he found a microphone stuck in his dirt-streaked face as they headed to the waiting ambulances.

Dan hadn't planned for this but thought it would be better to say something now. "While I am obviously blessed that my family survived this attack, our thoughts are with those families that weren't so fortunate. I refuse to let this attack affect me, or how I live my life. The animals who did this will surely be caught and justice done, of that I have no doubt. If you'll excuse me, I need to be with my family."

The applause started again as Dan had his arm around Emma and led her toward the ambulance, Harry and Hermione following in their wake.

The image of Daniel Granger, decrying the terrorist act before leading his family away, was an immensely powerful one. It was beamed around the world and watched by tens of millions of people. The signal it sent out was universal. If a mild-mannered dentist could thumb his nose at terrorists, then there was hope for everyone.

Crawley was still hurting but the Grangers' survival had certainly helped raise moral, Harry was just about to help some more.

-oOoOo-

Amelia and their new 'friends' John and Steve were waiting on them at Crawley Hospital, this eased their way through the admission and treatment process in record time. Harry then wanted to go and visit the people who were injured today.

Amelia caught on at once. "Harry, as much as I might agree with your sentiments, I can't allow this."

"Madam Bones, those people in here were injured today because the death eaters came after me. I'm already certain I'll suffer



nightmares for years over the people who died because of this, I can't help them. The injured I can and will help."

Amelia was left struggling to answer this young wizard, it was easy to see everyone else here agreed with him. Truth be told, so did she. Harry then sealed the deal.

"Amelia, if it makes you feel any better, you can say you confiscated my wand. It can be in your possession for the entire visit."

She accepted the wand and tucked inside her jacket. All the injured were currently housed in the same ward for ease of treatment as the hospital's emergency procedures had swung into effect.

Amelia casually cast a confundus charm over the nursing station as Harry made straight for the nearest patient who happened to be a young girl.

Both parents appeared younger than Dan and Emma, but then the girl looked about half Hermione's age. It was hard to tell the little girl's age though, with one half of her face swathed in bandages.

Harry spoke directly to the little girl. "Hi, I'm Harry. What's your name?"

The girl's answer was barely above a whisper. "June."

"Well June, I'm going to ask you to trust me. I promise it won't hurt and your mum and dad will be here with you."

June's mum and dad currently couldn't move anything other than their eyeballs, she didn't know this and held on tight to her mum's hand.

Harry banished the bandages and dressing, revealing that the side of this beautiful little girl's face looked as if some savage animal had spent an afternoon chewing on it. Harry's hand slowly and gently made its way over the horrendous wound. The swelling began to dissipate as healthy skin grew to cover the repaired flesh underneath. There was the merest hint of a scar on June's cheek but you would really need to be looking for it before you saw it.

"It's better if you let your hair grow back naturally June. I want you to wear a hat for the rest of the summer to keep the sun off your face, the new skin will burn very easily."

It was with a look of wonderment that June raised her hand to her face and felt smooth skin once more. She could only nod about the hat before Harry bent down and kissed her forehead.

"You're a very brave girl June but I have to go and see other people, goodbye for now."

June's parents could suddenly move again and her sobbing mother soon had her little girl wrapped in her arms. Harry had June's tearful father grabbing him in a bear hug.

"Son, whatever you did there was amazing. How can we ever thank you?"

"Please just tell no one what happened here. Are you and your wife ok?"

"I was at work while Betty and June were out shopping. Betty's got a slash on her leg where flying glass sliced her, that had to be stitched but all our focus has been on June."

Harry noticed the woman's trouser leg was torn and bloody, he would get back to her if he was able.

John stopped to have a word with June and her parents as Harry led the group to the next bed. The injuries in the ward all appeared to be all cuts and blunt trauma, things Helga had taught him to deal with. Harry was erecting privacy wards around each bed as he did his best to help the victims of the death eater attack meant for him.

The most heart-wrenching was a young boy named David who, after being healed of his injuries, then wanted Harry to help his big sister. His mother had to explain that Debbie couldn't be helped, she then thanked Harry profusely for healing her son.

It required Hermione and Emma wrapping Harry in their arms as Harry blamed himself for David no longer having a big sister. He broke down as both mother and daughter offered what comfort they could.

Dan was standing with Amelia and Steve, all amazed at Harry's work. Their heart went out to him as he broke down, he attempted to explain Harry's reaction. "Hermione says Harry has a saving people thing. He wants to save everyone though and takes it personally when he can't. When his friends are in trouble, he doesn't hesitate but rushes to their aid. Voldemort used that against him today."

"I wonder if Voldemort realises what he's done?"

Both men were now glancing at the woman for an explanation. "He killed Harry's parents when he was just a toddler, today he went after the people Harry now thinks of as his family. Harry will react far harsher to that than he would an attempt on his own life."

Dan could certainly agree with that, Steve had a question for her though.

"What's the ministry's position on this matter?"

"Mr Kirk, ending this conflict is the main focus of my department, and probably the entire ministry"

Dan then asked Steve a question he wanted to know the answer to. "What is our government's position on this?"

He was deadly serious. "You get me this bastard's address, I can guarantee there will be a military 'accident' right on top of him. How isolated his location is will determine the size of the accident our planes deliver."

Amelia prided herself on being well versed on muggle technology, this was beyond her comprehension. "You can do that?"

"Amelia, our technology practically allows us to choose which window the bomb flies in, and allows us to film it too!"

Hermione and Emma had managed to get Harry back together again, that and there were still injured people he wanted to help.

Hermione went with him to the next casualty, an old woman with a frame keeping the bedcovers off her lower body. Falling masonry had broken both her legs and she was slipping in and out of

consciousness due to the pain relief medication. Harry had vanished the casts and healed her, he was getting ready to move on to the next bed when an arthritic old hand reached for his.

"Sonny, I don't know what you did but thank you."

Harry took both the old lady's hands in his. "Ma'am, you're very welcome. I'm only sorry you were hurt in the first place. "

Hermione watched closely as the swelling in the old lady's joints disappeared while fingers that probably hadn't straightened in years now achieved that feat.

Before he could move on to the next patient, Hermione had him in a hug again. "I'm so proud of you, and I've also made my mind up. This is what I want to do too, can you teach me?"

He gave her a gentle kiss. "Hermione, even sharing memories it will take years."

"Harry, I don't plan on going anywhere. I'm looking forward to those years!"

Emma stood back and observed as Harry magically healed people while John followed on, explaining he was from the government and they could never talk about this. Amelia was using her magic to ensure no one interfered with the work Harry was doing and this raised an obvious question in Emma's mind. Why couldn't it be like this all the time?

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 13

Albus Dumbledore was currently faced with the harsh reality of just how far his star had waned. He was reduced to discovering the news from his issue of the Daily Prophet. His only consolation was the shocked expressions around the Hogwarts breakfast table, it was clearly news to Minerva and Hagrid as well.

The pictures had obviously been obtained from the muggles since they didn't move, it was also clear everyone reading thought they didn't lack any impact from this impairment. They portrayed everything that needed saying simply because of the subject matter. A dozen death eaters, in full regalia, firing curses at a muggle building would see more than a few people choking on their breakfast.

Harry Potter leading his fiancée away from the devastation the death eaters caused was another picture that didn't need a caption. Rita had also somehow managed to get a quote from Harry.

Fifteen death eaters thought it would be a good idea to attack my family, two of them are now dead. The other thirteen have forty-eight hours to hand themselves over to the DMLE before I come looking for them. I can promise them one thing though, I won't be a coward and hide behind a mask. They'll know its Harry Potter who's administering the justice they deserve for what they did here today.

Albus couldn't help but be reminded of Alastair's words. 'The boy's not dark but anyone touching the Granger girl is signing their own death warrant.' It would appear that his old friend was at least in part correct with that statement. That the Prophet printed a quote from a muggle was another sign of how the times were changing.

Dan Granger's words would have the same effect on their world as they had in his own, though for a slightly different reason. If a mere muggle could stand up to Voldemort, how could a wizard or witch cower in fear at the mere mention of his name? It also raised a modicum of respect for the family that their saviour had chosen to marry into.

Albus almost raised a chuckle at the sheer audacity of Rita Skeeter having a pop at someone else for irresponsible journalism, he didn't think she knew what that phrase meant. She did raise a valid point

that Teen Witch Weekly, for all intents and purposes, practically printed the Grangers' address for the death eaters to attack. Albus headed for his office, he would need to floo Amelia Bones about this situation.

-oOoOo-

Amelia was in her office when the last person she wanted to see had their head appear in her fireplace.

Albus didn't even bother with a greeting but got straight to the point. "Amelia, can I assume you've seen today's Prophet? Particularly the quote from Mr Potter."

"Well Albus, since Mr Potter knew I was going to be contacting the Prophet, he made the quote to me so I would pass it on. I think it's safe to assume I know what he said."

This rocked Albus back on his heels, but not for long. "So you approve of giving witches and wizards forty-eight hours to surrender before Harry murders them?"

"Actually, it was my idea!" Amelia couldn't believe it, she'd actually rendered Dumbledore speechless. Now that was priceless. She continued before he regained his power of speech. "Harry originally wanted to make it twenty-four hours but he was absolutely exhausted. I managed to convince him to make it longer, give himself a bit of a break."

Albus knew Amelia was trying to bait him by emphasising she knew more than he did. He had no intention of rising to it, didn't mean there wasn't information he wanted. "Why was Harry so exhausted? I assumed they were nowhere near the building at the time of the attack."

"Mr Potter was actually inside the building when it collapsed, receiving injuries to his head. He was exhausted after visiting the hospital to have a chat with all those injured."

Albus knew exactly what 'talk' was a euphemism for where Harry Potter and injured people were now concerned. "Healing muggles is against the statute of secrecy."

"I am well aware of that Albus and took all the appropriate precautions. I confiscated Mr Potter's wand for the duration of his visit and accompanied him myself. I can honestly say I didn't see Mr Potter cast one spell the entire time we were there. Is that all you called for Albus? We're rather busy here at the moment."

Albus was not about to be dismissed like some errant first year student. "I'm finding it hard to believe the ministry could support the idea of vigilantes? Where is the process of law in Mr Potter tracking these people down to murder them?"

Amelia exploded at the sheer impudence of this old bugger, he wasn't getting away with that. "Where was the process of law for Sirius Black or Severus Snape? Where was the process of law that saw a baby placed with muggle relatives that hated magic? You appear to think the law is your personal plaything to do with as you please, I would have thought spending some time in one of our cells would have taught you it most certainly is not."

She tried to reign in her temper but this sanctimonious, hypocritical old bastard really rubbed her up the wrong way. "I watched eight muggle bodies removed from that wreckage yesterday, six of them children. Cornelius was forced to inform the muggle Prime Minister of the facts of this case, they've demanded action before they take it upon themselves to solve this problem permanently. This is now a joint operation and they've already met, and been very impressed by one Harry Potter."

Amelia placed as much emphasis as she could on her next statement. "Do not attempt to stand in his way Albus. Harry has already stated he wishes to live and work in the muggle world, yesterday they welcomed him with open arms. That young man now has the power of two governments behind him as we attempt to solve the Voldemort problem once and for all."

Albus had trouble believing things had spiralled so much out of his control but Amelia wasn't yet finished. "Albus, Cornelius couldn't care less if Harry publicly beheaded the death eaters in Diagon Alley. As long as the problem is dealt with, our minister doesn't want to concern himself with the details. You better be sure your boy Snape is as pure as you say, I can't see the public standing for any death eaters still being at large at the end of this. That would be especially true with one as universally loathed as Severus Snape."

Albus immediately changed the subject. "Amelia, I'm worried that all this power and adulation might go to Harry's head. I well remember another young man who was well loved at Hogwarts..."

This time Amelia didn't hold back, she let Albus have it with both barrels. "Albus Dumbledore, don't you dare try and compare Harry Potter to Tom Riddle. I've spent most of my adult life fighting against dark wizards, Harry will never be one of them. If he wasn't so completely enamoured with Miss Granger, I would be trying to arrange something between him and my Susan. Quite simply, he's the finest young man I've ever met."

Their conversation was ended by one of her aurors entering her office and interrupting. "Sorry boss but there's a large mob forming outside the office of Teen Witch Weekly. We've already dispatched a team of aurors to keep the peace."

She nodded and asked to be kept informed of the situation before turning back to her conversation with Dumbledore. "The public has spoken Albus. In their eyes, the boy is golden. That he's handsome, charming and an intrinsically moral young man just adds to the attraction." With that, Amelia cut the connection and got on with her day.

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The intrinsically moral Harry Potter was currently waking in bed to discover his delectable fiancée wrapped around him. She'd clearly been awake for some time and greeted him with a wide smile.

"Morning love."

Harry enjoyed the greeting, and the following kiss, until his brain kicked into gear. This was Hermione though, a young woman who never did anything without a good reason. Why she was sleeping in his bed along with him was a reason he couldn't wait to hear. There was however an important question he had to ask first. "Do your mum and dad know you're in here with me?"

Hermione's smile never wavered. "After we put you to bed, I explained to them that I would be sleeping beside you. I wanted to be close if the nightmares came. Neither mum nor dad appeared to



be too concerned. I think they took the view that you were so exhausted, my virtue was safe. How did you sleep?"

Harry gently kissed her lips. "Like a baby, you being here must have chased all the nightmares away. I just wish I'd been awake enough to enjoy having the beautiful Hermione Granger spend the night in my bed."

This saw him receive a light punch on the shoulder. "Hey Potter, you've already got a ring on my finger and me sleeping in your bed. You don't need to butter me up anymore."

"Hermione, you know I can't lie to you. Waking up to see your face beside me already makes this one of my best mornings ever."

There was a knock at the door before Emma snuck her head in. Seeing Hermione lying there snuggling into her fiancée seemed the most natural thing in the world to Emma, Dan would probably have a different opinion though. "Morning you two. How are you feeling Harry? You were pretty out of it last night"

Harry tried not to let his blushes show, he was in bed with this woman's daughter for Merlin's sake. "A lot better Emma, I guess it was a reminder that I can't save everyone. I was totally exhausted last night and still feel pretty weak today. That's something I'm going to have to work on, helping people without killing myself doing it."

"Harry, what you did last night was nothing short of amazing, the two men from the government certainly thought so."

Hermione's ears perked up at this. "How do you know that mum?"

"Your dad spent most of the evening talking to Steve and Amelia. They've solved the problem of the ministry trying to arrest you once Voldemort is gone. You are both now special agents for Her Majesty's Government."

Harry's jaw was moving but there was no sound coming out, Hermione didn't suffer from the same problem and burst into fits of laughter. This proved too much for Harry. "Could my life be any bloody stranger? I'm now a government agent who has his beautiful fiancée in his bed. What's wrong with this picture? She's choking with laughter while her mother is standing at the bottom of my bed."

How to destroy the secret agent myth in one easy lesson, Hardly James Bond is it?"

This set Hermione off again before she managed to get her laughing under control. "Oh Harry I'm sorry but this weird thought just popped into my head. It's not so much double-O-seven, more double-O-nine and three quarters!" Hermione once more burst into gales of laughter. This time though, she was joined by her mother.

All this hilarity drew Dan into the room. As much as he didn't ever want to see his daughter in bed with a male, he was forced to concede that Harry's discomfort was funny. That was until he spied the mischievous glint in the young man's eyes.

"Well what does that make you two? Emma here is clearly M while Hermione has her choice of Moneypenny, Plenty O'Toole or Pussy Galore!"

The stunned silence was broken by Dan. "If Harry get's a DB5, I want one too!" At the sight of both Granger girls without a witty comeback, it was Harry and Dan's turn to laugh.

Both women though were not about to let them away with that, Hermione and Emma each grabbing a pillow from Harry's bed soon saw both males ducking for cover. They were still laughing though.

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There was not the slightest sign of laughter at number four Privet Drive, breakfast at the Dursleys was a solemn affair. Their morning newspapers were of course filled with yesterday's horrendous events in Crawley, this was forcing the Dursleys to face a life-changing decision. They were probably the only ones in Little Whining who understood what the men in masks with sticks in their hands were. The picture of their nephew leading his new fiancée from the rubble also left the Dursleys in no doubt who the target of the attack was.

If they were prepared to destroy a building in the centre of Crawley to kill their nephew, they certainly wouldn't think twice about destroying a house in Little Whining. Vernon had finally made his mind up.

"Right, time to pack. I'll phone Marge and see if she can put us up for a few weeks, give us time to get the house up for sale."

Dudley was not happy. His opinion wasn't even asked for, never mind listened to. "I don't want to leave here, what about all my friends?"

Vernon grabbed a newspaper and opened it at the page displaying pictures of those who had lost their lives yesterday. Nearly all of the images were school photographs. "Is that what you want for you and your friends? I really don't care if the freaks kill each other until extinction. When decent, law-aiding citizens of Britain can't go shopping without being murdered, it's time to take action."

Petunia agreed wholeheartedly with Vernon, she wanted her precious Dudikins as far away from any trouble as possible. "He came here and warned us this could happen, your father and I didn't believe him. You can't argue with that!" Petunia indicated the newspapers to her sullen son.

"That could easily have been our house destroyed and he wouldn't be here to save us." This statement saw both Dursley males glance at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"What, you don't think it was magic that saved them? I've seen that girl's picture in his room before. She goes to the same school as him, that's what saved them and her parents. If those masked people come here, our only hope is to be somewhere else."

Both Vernon and Dudley studied the papers again before agreeing with her, they hurried to begin preparations for the move. The Dursleys were leaving Privet Drive today.

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Breakfast in Glasgow at the Potter house was a lot livelier and happier. Having eaten very little the day before, all were hungry. Harry had burned off so much energy, he ate almost the same as the other three combined. That Dobby was also on the mend cheered the entire house up.

Winky popped in with the mail from the house in Crawley, including a package for Harry. On opening, there was official identification

proclaiming that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger worked for the British government.

Harry didn't know what to say. Faced with this reality, the James bond jokes were no longer funny. Hermione was also shocked at her new status but her curiosity won out.

"Dad, these are wonderful but what do they require of us in return?"

"Steve was very impressed with Harry's healing abilities last night. How could he not be? I didn't think I was breaking any confidences when I mentioned Harry wanted to study medicine. He's prepared to open any and all doors to see you get exactly what you want."

Dan could immediately see the look of revulsion from Harry at that last remark, he tried to put him straight. "Harry, they want you working for them because of what you can do, not for any silly nick-names the magical world has given you. Last night you literally changed people's lives in that hospital ward, and the entire evening is now covered by the official secrets act. I doubt if anyone you healed last would be running to the press anyway."

Emma understood Harry didn't want special treatment, he just didn't understand he was very special. She was used to seeing the best people head-hunted and understood where the government was coming from with this. Harry Potter would be an asset any Government would want to have working for them, Hermione was no slouch either. "Harry, almost all the large research projects in medicine have some form of government backing. Think of all the good you could do with the government on your side for a change?"

Dan agreed with his wife and continued to try and allay their fears. "I think the most you would be asked to do would be to heal some people, something you're hardly likely to object to. Your actions helped both governments deal with this disaster yesterday. Us four publically surviving and then healing all those people will buy some time to deal with the death eater problem."

He looked earnestly at the young man who was currently holding his daughter's hand as his next words came straight from the heart. "I know you just want to be an ordinary young man Harry but please believe me when I say that I will be forever grateful that you're not."

Dan's gaze travelled from his daughter to his wife and Harry nodded his understanding. No other words of thanks would ever be needed.

Emma though just had another inspired thought of what these new roles meant for Harry and Hermione. "Since you are now both working for the government, surely Hermione doesn't need to return to Hogwarts? The ministry wouldn't dare touch her now."

Hermione knew neither of her parents wanted her returning to the castle but there were other things to take into consideration too. "You're probably right mum in that I could not go back and no action would be taken. The problem is that I've publicly said I'm returning and don't want those death eaters to think they scared me away. Hermione Granger getting on the Hogwarts express shows them, and the rest of the wizarding community I'm not afraid."

This earned a kiss on the cheek from Harry. "Now you know why the sorting hat placed your daughter in the house of the brave."

Hermione smiled and tried to reassure her parents she would be fine. "I want to walk out that castle on my own terms. Anyway, with Harry there, what could possibly happen to me?"

Neither Dan nor Emma had the heart to point out all the stuff that had happened to her while Harry was beside her. They just knew they wouldn't relax until she was safely out of that nut house for good.

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There had been much drinking late into the night, celebrating Potter's demise and toasting two young fallen heroes to their cause. Draco fully expected he would be waking this morning with a sore head. What he did not expect was to be awakened by his dark mark burning as his master summoned his loyal followers.

Draco dressed quickly and was about to use his portkey when his mother entered his room. She tossed today's issue of the Prophet onto his bed.

"You might want to look at that before you rush to leave."

The picture of Potter and Granger still alive had Draco rubbing his eyes in disbelief before the reality of what this would mean hit him hard. The fear that gripped Draco soon saw him rushing to the toilet and emptying the contents of his stomach. How was this possible? The plan had worked perfectly and everyone had played their part. He'd pressed his dark mark mere seconds after they'd raced into the building, the speed of the responding death eaters didn't leave time for them to get out.

Narcissa Malfoy watched as the fear gripped her son, both knew what the dark lord's response to this would be. Narcissa though, was equally worried about Potter's response to this. Draco was clearly involved in the attack and Potter had publicly sworn vengeance on the perpetrators.

She had stood back and watched her husband throw his life away as the quest for pureblood supremacy consumed him. Now it would appear that her son couldn't wait to follow in his father's footsteps. The difference for Draco was that there was a new player in the game now, a player who followed his own rules.

Narcissa had heard who dispatched Bellatrix, a feat worthy of any warrior. Now that same person would be coming for Draco and Narcissa had no intention of being caught in the crossfire.

It was time to take an extended holiday, Monaco was beautiful at this time of year. Thinking of the bloody alternative that would surely unfold if she stayed here, Monaco was beautiful at any time of year.

If Draco was so desperate to follow in his father's footsteps, then he could face his fate on his own. It was a fate that Narcissa didn't need to be a seer to predict. The only doubt left in her son's miserable excuse of a life was who would kill him first, the dark lord or Potter.

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The crowd outside the Teen Witch Weekly office was rapidly reaching the status of a mob. That these like-minded individuals had all reached the same conclusion, and cared enough to show up here to protest their disgust, gave them a shared bond of outrage. That so many could reach the same conclusion yet the magazine's editor couldn't see that address should never have been printed just added fuel to their anger.

The auror in charge asked the editor to come out and say a few words, hoping to defuse the situation. Seeing a squad of aurors holding the crowd back convinced the editor this was a good idea.

The crowd fell silent to hear what she had to say. "We at the magazine, like everyone else, were devastated to hear about the attack on Harry Potter. This is especially true of the young journalist who wrote the piece that has you gather here today. She is after all a dorm mate of Miss Granger and the girlfriend of Harry's best friend. I would like to say however that no one from our magazine played any part in the attack on Crawley."

This did not go down well with the crowd, the murmurings of dissent turned to shouts of agreement with the accusation levied by one of their number. "You printed the address so the death eaters knew where to go!"

The editor thought was totally unrepentant. "Our magazine prides itself on telling our readers the truth. No one from Mr Potter's camp requested any information to be withheld, nor have they complained about the article. No one was here to complain before the attack. We are being vilified for not seeing into the future, a future no one else saw despite what a certain Miss Skeeter might claim."

The mob now felt they were being blamed for the magazine's mistake. An apology might have worked in diffusing the righteous anger felt amongst them, this was a slap on the face with a wet fish. The editor's confrontational approach could only really have one outcome. Within minutes she was being pelted with rolled up bits of parchment, every one of them a notice to cancel their subscription to Teen Witch Weekly. It wasn't long before magazines with the offending article printed in them joined the barrage raining down on the editor.

The attending aurors decided to let the crowd blow off some steam. No one was being hurt and they would only take action if wands started to be drawn or the missiles being thrown had the potential to injure.

The editor was left to scramble back into the building, not realising that the entire encounter had been broadcast live on WWN. The reporter mentioning that the editor was being pelted with

subscription cancellation slips sparked a tidal wave of social consciousness amongst listeners the length and breadth of the country. The offices of Teen Witch Weekly would soon be flooded with cancelled subscriptions.

There would be no issue printed this week, there weren't enough customers left to make it financially viable. The magazine Teen Witch Weekly would soon fire their editor but couldn't stop the impending disaster, it would be bankrupt before the end of August.

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Hermione might have accused Ron of having the emotional range of a teaspoon but at the moment the youngest Weasley boy felt as if he was drowning in conflicting emotions. His two best friends had barely escaped a trap with their lives and his girlfriend was a nervous wreck. Ginny's assault on his girlfriend had driven home just how big a part Lavender had inadvertently played in that attempted trap. What he was supposed to do about the situation was so far beyond the understanding of one Ronald Weasley, it might as well be on another planet.

Lavender was so devastated that Ron feared for his girlfriend's health if he broke up with her at the moment. He still wasn't sure if that was a course of action he even wanted to consider. He really liked Lavender and felt it would be wrong of him to bail when the going got rough. Harry and Hermione stood together and faced up to whatever shit life seemed to throw at them, Ron felt Lavender deserved the same sort of commitment and consideration from him.

He wanted to write to his friends and at least try to explain his reasoning to them. The problem was that no one knew where they were and neither of their elves would answer if he called them. Ginny and Neville weren't speaking to him though none of them knew where Harry and Hermione were either.

He would just have to hope his two best friends gave him the chance to explain. If, after hearing him out, they chose not to be his friend anymore then Ron really couldn't blame them.

-oOoOo-



Harry was very conscious of the fact their friends would be going nuts, he also didn't want to tempt fate by letting the location of his new house become known. He had no intention of providing another target for the death eaters. Winky was dispatched with dinner invitations that were also portkeys to Neville, Ginny, Remus and Tonks.

Dobby was maintaining he would be ready to resume his duties tomorrow. Harry understood the little guy enough to know refusing him would really hurt Dobby's feelings. At the same time he didn't want Dobby overdoing it when he wasn't fully fit, he called for back-up in the shape of Winky.

"Winky, Dobby says he's fit enough to resume work tomorrow. Can you keep an eye on him for the next few days? I don't want him overdoing it."

"Yes master, Winky will make sure Dobby takes plenty of rest. Winky looks after our family."

That last comment surprised Harry, but at least now he didn't have to worry about Dobby trying to make up for work the elf perceived he'd missed by being injured. Winky would take Harry's 'order' very seriously, there was now no danger of Dobby being allowed to strain himself.

The eight that settled down to dinner that night were all easy in each other's company and, after some emotional greetings, settled into having a relaxing evening. Just what the four occupants of the Potter house needed.

"I sent Luna an owl, letting her know you were both ok. I didn't want to chance her hearing anything different."

"Thanks Neville, I'm keeping Hedwig close at the moment. She must be about the most recognisable owl in Britain and I don't think it's safe for her to be delivering mail just now."

Tonks tried to lighten the mood. "The offices of Teen Witch Weekly were besieged by people blaming them for practically printing your address. So far, only Ginny here has gone after Lavender." This saw Ginny blushing as Tonks told the tale.

Ginny was blushing even more by the time Tonks got to the end of it. "It took the combined efforts of the twins and Percy to pull her off Lavender, and that was Ginny not using her wand."

"I never even thought of drawing my wand. I just saw Lavender sitting across from me and sprang at her. Guys, I have a letter here from Ron, I was going to give you it before I left." Ginny handed it over.

"Thanks Ginny, if you don't mind, we'll read it later. We're not quite sure how to handle the situation at the moment."

Hermione agreed with Harry and tried to explain their thinking on the matter. "We invited the biggest gossip in Hogwarts, who's also got a part-time job as a journalist, to our party. We can't really then complain when she writes about us. We just never expected the response we got, I'm positive Lavender didn't either."

Harry rested his hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Its water under the bridge now love, the stream has to move on. One thing is certain though, we could never take that risk again. Innocent people lost their lives because of a simple error."

Everyone understood what they both meant. They had been incredibly lucky but others weren't. They wouldn't be giving the death eaters a second chance.

Ginny also had a message to pass on from her mother. She was pretty sure what the answer would now be but had to ask anyway. "The Burrow will be finished next week, mum is desperate to throw a party."

Hermione answered their friend. "Ginny, Harry's best man at a wedding this summer and we aren't committing to anything else."

The little redhead was quite philosophical about Hermione's answer. "Ron is certain to mention it to Lavender, never mind invite her. Even if she doesn't mention it in Teen Witch Weekly, she could probably reach as many people just by gossiping"

Tonks told them their news. "We're looking to get married next week, that will get us married quarters at Hogwarts. Remus' status

changed when the ministry announced we had won the award, we don't have to wait until it's presented."

Harry was smiling at that news. "That's great, and how would you like a villa in the south of France for your honeymoon? It's paid for until the end of August."

Both Remus and Tonks had thought the villa was beautiful and quickly accepted Harry's offer. The conversation was now entered on pleasanter subjects and the rest of the evening continued in the same vein.

Hermione suddenly realised this was their first dinner party in their new home, home for Hermione was now wherever Harry was. She wondered if her parent's would object if she slept in his bed again tonight? She reckoned there was only one way to find out. Unfortunately, Hermione was going to be disappointed. Harry had other plans for tonight.

-oOoOo-

Draco Malfoy just had the worst day of his life. The dark lord had spent his time throwing our cruciatus curses like rice at a wedding. As if that wasn't bad enough, he then basically raped his follower's minds attempting to discover who had failed him during the attack on Potter. The fact he was still alive established that the dark lord thought he had carried out his part of the mission as directed. Two others weren't so fortunate. Draco barely made it up the stairs of Malfoy Manor and collapsed fully clothed on top of his bed, he was asleep in moments.

A sharp snap close by dragged Draco from his slumber, getting hit on the face with pieces of his broken wand abruptly jolted him to complete consciousness. It was only then Draco realised he was lying spread-eagled on his bed and unable to move. The everlasting candle burning beside his bed was the only source of illumination currently lit in his bedroom. This unfortunately left most of the large room in either deep shadow or complete darkness. The voice he heard coming out of that darkness almost had Draco emptying his stomach once more in fear.

"Hello Draco. Did you really think I wouldn't come for you after trying to kill Hermione?"

He tried to keep the fear from his voice but couldn't quite pull it off.  
"Potter, how did you get in here?"

"Oh a little friend of mine knows this mansion better than you do."

"When the minister hears of this, you'll be heading for Azkaban."

The contempt in Harry's voice was unmistakable. "Draco, I work for new people now and the ministry can't touch me. I'm here for names Draco, I want to know who was behind those masks in Crawley?"

Draco's voice was cracking as he attempted bravado. "You don't scare me Potter. I know nothing about any attack, now release me at once." The darkness was making Draco feel like he was a little boy again, afraid of the boggyman hiding in the shadows. Yes he was older but now the boggyman was real and definitely here in his room. The next sentence turned Draco's blood to ice.

"Draco, you are going to die tonight. Only by telling me these twelve names will it be quick and painless."

"You're full of shit Potter, you don't have the balls for anything like aaaagh..."

The pain was unbelievable, the candlelight now glinted off the bejewelled hilt of the Sword of Gryffindor. The reason Draco could now see this work of goblin craftsmanship was that it had just been driven straight through his left thigh and was currently pinning him to his bed. He screamed himself hoarse from the pain and the sight of this sticking out his leg. That and knowing Potter was still waiting in the shadows terrified the blond Slytherin.

When Draco had recovered some control over himself, that hated voice spoke again.

"It hurts even worse being pulled out Draco, you still have another leg and two arms for me to work on next."

"Fuck off Potter aaaagh..."

Harry pulled the sword free of Draco's thigh and retreated into the shadows once more. There was no point in asking the question at

the moment as Draco was in so much pain, he probably couldn't tell Harry what day of the week it was.

Harry could see some semblance of reality return to Draco's eyes, he pushed on. "I want names Draco. I know you won't be able to give me the cowardly bastard's location but you can give me names."

Draco now found the sword pressed into his wand arm as Potter spoke again.

"There is some good news Draco, you're losing a lot of blood already and may die before I can do all four limbs. I hope you think your master is worth dying for." Harry pushed the sword a little harder.

The instant the sword broke through his skin, Draco began screaming out names. Draco was sobbing by the time he was finished spilling everything he knew. Harry became visible to Draco for the first time as he leaned forward and quickly healed his leg.

This saw a scrap of Draco's spirit return to the broken Slytherin. "I knew you didn't have it in you Potter."

"Oh you are so wrong Draco, ask your Aunt Bella when you meet her soon. You've had chances and warnings galore, you squandered every one of them."

Harry retreated back into the shadows, being an unseen threat once more adding menace to his words. "Going after the Grangers was your biggest and last mistake Draco. I healed you so you can lie there and wait for the death you planned for them. The room is silenced so you can scream as much as you like. Goodbye Draco, you'll be reunited with your two sidekicks soon."

"Potter, get back here and release me. Potter, take this spell off. Potter..." Draco waited on an answer but the only sound to be heard was his own harsh breathing. The silence very quickly became oppressive and Draco's already frayed nerves snapped, he began screaming for help at the top of his voice.

-oOoOo-

Harry appeared next to Steve and John, all three were about two hundred meters outside Malfoy Manor. "I got the names, he's all yours."

Steve got onto his radio while John fitted a device that resembled a telescope to a tripod he'd already assembled. He aimed this device at the Manor. It was only seconds later that Steve gave the order to activate the device, apparently the plane was already on its way.

With the target now 'painted' they both began setting up cameras to record the event while Harry stood by to provide a shield for the group if they needed one.

Draco was still screaming when the bomb hit. The death eater strategy was a sound one and they considered it poetic justice that they used it to destroy Malfoy Manor. The bomb was targeted at the ground floor and blasted out every wall and support structure on that level. The house fell in on itself, killing its only occupant.

-oOoOo-

Amelia was awakened by an owl tapping on her window. Hedwig delivered her a photograph and a roll of parchment. The photograph had a strange green tint and was of a massive pile of rubble. The parchment was merely a list of twelve names with two of them scored out. The small note at the bottom offered a limited explanation.

Voldemort has already killed the two names crossed out – HJP

Amelia was wondering how he managed to get a hold of these names and what the significance of the picture was when her floo flashed for an emergency call.

The duty auror appeared surprised that she was already up but pressed on regardless. "Boss, Malfoy Manor took a massive hit, it's completely destroyed. It appears just like Crawley but a building that size would have needed over a hundred witches and wizards to do that amount of damage."

Hedwig flew out the window causing Amelia to wonder if the muggles had chosen which window the bomb should fly into Malfoy Manor through. She couldn't help but shudder at the destructive

power and the swiftness of the attack. This was a message being sent to everyone, including her and the ministry. Do your job and deal with the problem or we'll do it for you.

Amelia glanced once more at the list of names. "Call everyone in to the office, I want all aurors under my command assembled for five a.m."

-oOoOo-

Back in Glasgow, Harry lovingly placed Hedwig on her perch. He had stood just outside the Bones wards and released the beautiful owl to deliver the message. He'd originally planned to deliver it as Puck but Amelia was a smart and careful lady, she had an animagus ward built into her defences. He could have by-passed the ward but wanted to keep his form a secret and anyway, Hedwig got jealous when he delivered his own mail.

Harry knew he was being overly protective of his family, he certainly considered Hedwig to be a part of that family.

After twenty minutes under his shower, Harry still couldn't wash away the sense of being dirty at what he had to do earlier. No matter how often he rationalised it to himself, he'd still tortured another human being tonight. It would take more than a shower to wash away the taint of being unclean. He made his way into bed only to find a certain someone waiting on him there.

Hermione welcomed him with open arms but couldn't fail to notice his reluctance. She understood exactly why that was and set out to prove it didn't matter to her. "Did you get the names?"

Harry was well aware his intended was scarily smart but this seemed a stretch even for her. "How could you possibly know that?"

Hermione physically pulled him into bed and wrapped him in a comforting hug. "I know you Harry, Malfoy was always going to get a visit. That and I asked Dobby where you were when your bed was empty."

"I thought I told him not to tell anyone" Hermione had his head pressed against her chest, an amazing chest that was covered only

with a thin summer nightshirt. When she chuckled with laughter, her body did wonderful things to him.

"You did silly but I'm not anyone, I'm Mistress Hermione to the elves. You may be able to get them to keep quiet about a birthday or Christmas gift but not much else. We won't have any secrets between us Harry"

Harry currently had his face pressed into the two most wonderful objects in the world while his beautiful fiancée ran her fingers through his hair. He might need another shower shortly, a cold one. He told this wonderful woman what was currently eating away at his soul. "I had to torture him to get those names Hermione."

Hermione's stroking of his hair never faltered, there was not the pushing away in revulsion Harry half-expected.

"I'll bet it shook him up that you did something to him he wouldn't hesitate to do to either of us? Stupid bastard never did have any sense. I'm assuming he's past learning any now?"

"Our new friends took care of him, collapsed his precious mansion around his ears."

Hermione lifted his head from her chest and said "Good" before kissing him and returning said head to its previous location.

Harry couldn't help but think he was in heaven as all thoughts of guilt were banished from his body. Hermione saying good and holding him close was all the redemption he would ever need.

Hermione felt him relax in her arms and smiled once more. Her heart broke at the things Harry had to do but she would never let him see that. Harry might think he was tasked with saving the world but her task was a lot simpler, she was here to save her Harry. Hermione didn't consider that a task, rather a labour of love. It was a labour she intended to be happily performing for the rest of her life.

A/N Thanks for reading



## Chapter 14

Amelia looked over her assembled aurors with a sense of pride. These were HER officers yet she also felt a little sorry for what she was going to have to do here today. Her eyes settled on young Zak Dolan, she really was throwing him in at the deep end here. Zak was a muggleborn and, in her opinion, the best person to handle this. Quite simply, he was Amelia's unofficial department source for all things muggle. Time to get this meeting underway, they had a lot to get through here this morning.

"Nice to see everyone here, I won't keep you in suspense any longer as I'm sure you're all dying to know why I dragged you out of bed at this hour."

There was a picture of Malfoy Manor now projected behind Amelia. If any building radiated power, wealth and influence, this was it.

"What you see behind me is a picture of what used to be Malfoy Manor. My use of the past tense is no mistake, since sometime around midnight, this is all that's left of it!"

A flick of her wand and the photograph now displayed was the one Harry had sent her. It drew gasps from an audience who immediately recognised the amount of power required to cause that type of destruction on such a grand scale.

"Draco Malfoy was not one of the death eaters pictured attacking in Crawley. His job was to be look-out and alert the attackers when Harry Potter and Hermione Granger entered the building. He played a vital role in eight people losing their lives and has now paid the ultimate price for that act."

Not one pair of eyes had left the picture and Amelia knew the question was coming, she wasn't disappointed.

"Boss, what the hell could cause that amount of destruction? That place was a veritable fortress."

This was the bit Amelia knew would shock her troops, it scared the hell out of her. "As you may know, the minister was forced to contact the minister after the attack on Crawley. Bringing justice to those who were involved in that attack is now a joint operation between us

and the muggles, this is how the muggles dealt with their part of it. I've asked Auror Dolan to give us a quick brief on how this was done."

Zak gingerly got to his feet and tried not to let his nerves show. He was only in his second year since graduating auror academy, now he was standing here having to brief some of the wizened old aurors who taught him everything he knew about the job. He sat the small box down on the table in front of his boss and took comfort from the smile she gave him. Zak would rather be anywhere else than standing here now but when Amelia Bones asks you to do something, the word no is not an option as an answer.

"Good morning everyone, from the information Madam Bones has given me, it's quite clear how this strike was carried out. Please excuse the crudeness of my props, I only found out I was doing this about an hour ago. That was far too late to start wishing I'd paid more attention in Professor McGonagall's class."

Everyone knew your attention had to be total in Minerva McGonagall's class so that got a laugh or two and allowed Zak to relax his nerves a bit. He just hoped his model worked, otherwise he was going to look a right tosser.

"This has precision airstrike written all over it." Zak removed a model fighter plane from his box and used his wand to levitate it above the desk. He then turned the box upside down to represent the target.

"The easiest way to carry out a precision air attack is to 'paint' the target. Think of it something like attaching a tracking charm."

This was terminology they understood, so far so good. Zak removed a small laser pen from his pocket and fired the beam at the box. All eyes were now focused on the little red dot.

"With this method, you don't need to be inside the wards. Anywhere you have a view of the building will do. Once the target is acquired, all that remains to be done is radio the plane and inform the pilot his target is ready. The plane will be over three miles high and at least five miles away, all that's needed now is for the pilot to press a button and death will come calling."

Zak had the plane in the air and twisted his wand, a small firework shot out the underside of the plane and smacked straight into the red dot on the box.

"The bomb would crash through all defences, neither wards nor walls will stop it. I estimate this one would have been around the thousand pounds of explosives range, easily enough to destroy a building this size."

This was met with total silence as witches and wizards struggled to comprehend this, confirmation was asked for.

"Are you saying one of these bombs was enough to reduce Malfoy Manor to rubble, and this flying machine fired it from five miles away?"

Zak understood they weren't questioning him personally, they just were having trouble believing this.

"Yes, that's exactly right. There would be spotters on the ground whose job it would be to shine a dot of light on the building. Their version of a light would be much more powerful than this little toy I've got here. They should have been able to shine it from about a quarter of a mile away."

Amelia could see the realisation smacking into her aurors, there was no defence in the magical world that could cope with a weapon like this. All that was needed was someone who could see magic to point the light, the rest was inevitable and unstoppable. Considering the way their society treated squibs, they all understood there would be no shortage of volunteers for that position.

Amelia hated putting Zak on the spot here but this had to be done, news of this briefing would be all over the ministry before lunchtime. "Auror Dolan, is that the most powerful weapon that the muggles have in their arsenal?"

"Hell no, not even close!" Zak just realised what he'd said, and who he'd said it too. The smile his boss gave him said she expected Zak to continue. He tried to think of the best way to explain this to his fellow aurors.

"The one thing sure to get any muggle government's full attention is a terrorist attack, that this one also led to the death of children and you were always going to get a swift, decisive and deadly response."

Zak glanced back over his shoulder at the destroyed Malfoy Manor and let everyone draw their own conclusions. "Muggle governments have bombs so powerful that, should one be detonated in central London, their government, our ministry, St Mungo's, Diagon Alley and a few million people would all be gone within seconds."

That was a lot for magic users to fathom, Zak gave it a moment to sink in before continuing. "Probably the greatest fear of these governments is that a terrorist organisation gets its hands on one of these things and sets it off in a city. With Crawley, they saw evidence of terrorists who can appear and disappear at will, casually killing children in a busy street. That's why we have that picture behind us, it really was the only way they could respond."

The silence that followed this was long and thoughtful, Amelia once more took control. "Thank you for that Auror Dolan, I think it's safe to say we all learned something here today."

Amelia waved her wand and the picture changed as Zak took his props back to his seat. The image of the twelve death eaters attacking Crawley was now displayed.

"Now, as informative as Auror Dolan's briefing was, that's not the main reason I've assembled you here today. As I said right at the beginning, this is a joint operation. Now it's our turn!"

This had them all sitting up just a little bit straighter before Amelia continued. "In the early hours of this morning, I received a list of twelve names from Mr Potter.."

"The sneaky little devil!"

"Something you want to share with us Senior Auror Tonks?"

Tonks was shaking her head. "Sorry boss, it's just that Remus and I had dinner with them last night and nothing like this was mentioned. Is Harry working for us or them?"

Amelia jumped all over Tonks at that last remark. "Senior Auror Tonks, there is no us or them. Mr Potter is working to bring Voldemort and his minions to justice, just as everyone in this room is. I can assure everyone here that, should we discover Voldemort's whereabouts, I would have no hesitation in calling a strike like the one that levelled Malfoy Manor down on his head."

That was a popular announcement, it was far easier to go in later and pick up the bits rather than try to take the most powerful wizard in the country down.

Amelia now got down to the real business of this meeting. "I have been given the names of everyone in the picture behind me. I want them all to be eating their dinner tonight in one of our holding cells. The muggle government has shown us what it is capable of, I will not have my department found wanting." She glared at them to make sure they understood the message.

"Voldemort has already killed two of them and Pettigrew won't leave his master's side, that leaves us nine targets to bring in. We'll go with nine teams of six with the rest split into two emergency response teams in case we hit any trouble out there. Now here's what we're going to do..."

-oOoOo-

Edmund Parkinson was still suffering badly from the shakes, a by-product of spending the day with his master while the dark lord was in a foul mood. Repeated exposure to the cruciatus curse saw at least half his porridge shaken off the spoon before it completed the journey to his mouth. It was hardly surprising then that he didn't put up much of a fight when the aurors stormed his house with their wand's already drawn. He took three stunners to his torso before his body had time to hit the floor.

-oOoOo-

Duncan Dickenson was built like the proverbial brick shit house, with a constitution to match his rough exterior. Unlike Parkinson, there were no tell-tale signs of cruciatus exposure. His father allowed him to build a tolerance to the torture curse by casting it on him when he was a mere boy. His loving father justified the curse's use with the claim it would toughen Duncan up. Duncan wondered if his father

would be proud to know his theory was proven right. Then again, since it toughened his son up enough so he could kill his father when he was only thirteen, his late father probably already knew that.

You really needed to be tough to eat and drink in a place like Skunks' in Knockturn Alley. Once upon a time the pub had another name but everyone now just called it Skunks', purely because that was the nickname of the owner. It may seem strange for a witch to own the toughest pub in Britain but Skunk didn't get her nickname because she had a streak of white in her once black hair. Quite simply, she would do any stinking thing that was required to earn a knut and not caring who got hurt while she did it.

Duncan's eyes were immediately drawn to the young girl who was obviously lost and had wandered into the bar for help. She must be really desperate if she was asking Skunk for help.

The girl appeared about fifteen with long, dirty blond hair. She had a very pretty face and shapely legs extended below her robes, this girl was a looker. Duncan noticed all this while knocking three others out his way as he raced to get to the girl first. He couldn't remember the last time he had one so young and fine.

"Excuse me miss, if you need help well then you've just found the very fellow. Come with me and we'll get all your problems sorted out, no bother at all."

Duncan didn't give her time to answer but led her from the pub. They odd couple left too much jeering, whistling and rude comments shouted out with more than a hint of jealousy. He led her along while maintaining a tight grip on her arm, nodding occasionally but not listening to a word she said. He was too busy trying to get her back to his rooms before he was forced to fight someone else for the privilege, one glance had told Duncan she was worth fighting for.

When the first stunner hit, the surprised death eater merely staggered. The first spell was quickly followed by another four that put the hulking brute down. The young girl suddenly had pink, spiky hair and stunned the prisoner once more for good measure. Her team quickly surrounded them, their wands covering the downed death eater as he was disarmed and placed in manacles.

Tonks was pleased, that couldn't have gone much better. "Well done people, now let's get this piece of shit into a cell." They portkeyed out of there before any trouble could develop.

-oOoOo-

Harry was nervously eating his breakfast, having to concentrate on remaining visible while the temptation to become invisible was almost overwhelming. Every time he glanced towards Hermione's glowing features and wide grin, his discomfort and blush cranked up another notch. Last night he was too physically and emotionally drained to do more than cuddle into Hermione, this morning though was a whole different matter.

The physical side of their relationship took a large jump forward and Harry would like nothing better than to be sitting here wearing a shit-eating grin to match his fiancée's, the trouble with that was they were sitting having breakfast with her parents. Awkward didn't even begin to describe how he felt, Harry was sure there was a large sign hovering over his head proclaiming – Hey, you'll never believe what I did in bed with your daughter!

Emma didn't have to be a genius to see something had changed between the couple this morning. She was a great believer in not asking a question that you didn't want to know the answer too, but her curiosity was killing her. "Alright Hermione, what's going on?"

Hermione had a beautiful smile on her face and gave a contented sigh. "Oh mum, it's Harry. You'll never believe what he did last night. After you went to bed, he channelled his inner James Bond."

Hermione's breath was catching as she said this and both Granger parents were now examining Harry in minute detail. "Yes, he was sneaking around in the dark and getting up to things he shouldn't."

Harry was wondering if he could apparate out of here before Dan could get his hands on him. What the hell was Hermione up to?

"Yes daddy, our Harry here might just have earned that DB5."

Harry was looking at her, his eyes begging for mercy. Hermione decided to put him out of his misery.

"Double -O- Nine and three quarters here snuck off to Malfoy Manor last night to have a little chat with Draco. Then he and our new friends arranged for the same thing to happen to their manor as happened to your dental surgery. Unfortunately, Draco didn't have someone special make him wear an emergency portkey and his house fell on him." Hermione gave a little pause to let it sink in before delivering the coup de grace. "Of course, by this time he'd told Harry the names of everyone wearing a mask who attacked Crawley. Amelia Bones will be rounding them up today."

Emma had tears in her eyes as she rose slowly and made her way to Harry, she had trouble speaking but the hug she wrapped him in told Harry everything he needed to know. Dan was next, shaking his hand and looking like he just might buy Harry that DB5 himself for last night's work.

"You have no idea how much this means to us. Knowing they are going to be taken care of gives us hope of one day returning to our old life. Thank you Harry, from the bottom of our hearts."

This was surreal as Harry watched an emotional Dan and Emma leave, Hermione was still sporting the same grin she'd been wearing since sneaking out his bedroom this morning. She made her way over and sat on his lap, kissing him soundly before whispering in his ear.

"Next time you go off on a mission, make sure Pussy Galore comes too. Otherwise, this morning's performance will seem like a picnic! Harry, where you go, I go."

She kissed him again before rising and saucily sauntering out the room. Just before leaving, she turned her head to look back over her shoulder. Harry was sitting there pole axed with his jaw hanging open and she had to fight to contain her giggles, Hermione couldn't help but think 'mission accomplished'.

-oOoOo-

Cornelius was reading the special edition of the Prophet with a great sense of relief. The entire 'muggle assistance' episode could have blown up in his face, Much like Malfoy Manor must have done to Draco. The Malfoys might have been rich and powerful but much of their wealth and prestige had been gained at the expense of others,



the general public loved to see powerful figures brought down to earth and would weep no tears at the Malfoy woe.

Much of the outcry over involving muggles in magical affairs was choked off at the source by the news that, of the fifteen who were involved in the Crawley attack, only one remained still at large. There were five dead with trials for the other nine now scheduled to begin tomorrow.

This swift justice, combined with the image of a once imposing mansion reduced to rubble, was a convincing argument that the muggles were better left alone. Here was irrefutable proof that they were a race that reacted swiftly, and with deadly force to attacks on their people.

Cornelius didn't see the need to tell anyone that the muggle Prime Minister had promised him that, if the ministry didn't get this situation under control then there wouldn't be a ministry much longer. One glance at the picture of the destroyed Malfoy Manor was all the proof Cornelius needed that the chap wasn't joking. He decided to push for the veil as punishment for the nine currently held in their cells, appeasing the muggle government seemed like a good idea to him.

It had been bandied about the ministry for decades that the magical community would never survive, far less win, a war against the muggles. Here again was proof of that. Their society had struggled against you-know-who since the very early seventies, needing a toddler to save them. The muggles merely required his address to post him a message there was no recovering from.

Cornelius didn't care who finished off you-know-who, just as long as someone did. On that momentous day, there should be enough credit flying around for the minister to grab some for himself.

-oOoOo-

Harry and Hermione were down in the basement training room. He had shown her some spells that they'd then practiced for a while before resuming Hermione's animagus training. It was important that Harry kept her down here for at least a few hours while his plans unfolded upstairs. He now realised that Hermione had been hurt by his running off to deal with Malfoy on his own. Instead of shouting or arguing with him, she'd held him tight and soothed his soul. Putting

her own issues aside to help him was just the kind of response he'd come to expect from this wonderful girl, he was working on saying sorry and thanks at the same time.

Dobby and Winky were currently busy transferring the contents of the Black library to the room he had designated to become one in their Glasgow home. He also had Dan and Emma busy helping with this task as well. Wearing slight glamours, they were currently shopping in Glasgow's book shops. Both he and Hermione would need books on chemistry, biology, physics, maths and English to prepare for their non-magical exams. They would need to pass these courses if they wanted to study medicine at university, neither had any intention of using their new government connections to get an easy ride. With Hermione's parents currently at a loose end, both had offered to tutor on the subjects they needed.

They had been staring at one another for ages as Harry was in her mind, guiding her through the transformation process. Hermione broke their connection and suddenly shrieked when she noticed that her arms were covered in chocolate-brown feathers. They melted back into her skin. "Did you see that Harry? I got a bit of a shock there but I'm sure I can do it again."

She concentrated for a moment and the feathers reappeared.

"Hermione, that's wonderful but you mustn't overdo it. That's enough for now love."

She had both arms around Harry and was kissing him for all she was worth when her mother entered the room. "So, this is the kind of training you two get up to down here?"

Hermione stopped the kiss, thought not through any sense of embarrassment. She was way too excited for that. She rushed over to her mother. "Mum, wait until you see this!"

She held up her hand which very quickly became covered in feathers.

Harry hated spoiling her fun but, if she overtired herself in the beginning, it would just take longer to complete the transformation. "Hermione stop. I think it's time we show you what we've sneakily been preparing behind your back. No more feathers today love."

Harry had just given Hermione another focus for her excitement. "Will I like this surprise?"

Emma laughed in response, having seen the finished room before she came down here. "Hermione, I know you're going to love it. After Remus and Tonks get married, your dad and I will help you study for your normal exams. I'm afraid you're both on your own as far as those newt things are concerned."

Hermione was led into the new library and let out a squeal of delight. Apart from all the books, there were two desks for working at as well as a few wing-backed chairs and a leather sofa for just relaxing with a good book. She jumped on Harry and thanked him in a similar fashion to her greeting at the Grangers hired French villa.

Dan thought he must be getting used to them as a couple, either that or it was because Hermione wasn't dressed in a bikini at the moment. He found himself a lot more accepting of the situation this time.

-oOoOo-

Severus Snape was having a great deal of trouble accepting the current situation, a fact he was loudly proclaiming to Dumbledore in the headmaster's office. Pages of the special edition of the Prophet were scattered around the room as the potion master's temper saw him throw the newspaper away.

"My godson was murdered, by muggles no less and yet everyone is just accepting this? What in the name of Merlin is going on? Oh, or should that be 'in the name of Potter?' I'm half expecting that to be tomorrow's headline - Potter rules over Britain, World domination expected early next week!"

Albus tried not to sigh. "Severus, I raised the matter of Harry with Amelia Bones and was given short shrift. The wizarding world see the boy as a hero, an Order of Merlin winner no less. As you well know, Cornelius is heavily swayed by public opinion and won't hear a word said against the boy." The old wizard could see this news did not please his potions professor, he attempted to offer some advice.

"There is nothing either of us can do at the moment Severus, except wait and see what opportunities present themselves. Any further news from Voldemort?"

Severus shook his head. "He has very few followers left now. We both have heard the rumours of mercenaries from the four corners of the world entering Britain in the hope of claiming Potter's blood money. The dark lord is calling no one to his new location, I would suspect only he and Pettigrew know where it is."

Albus nodded in understanding. With some of the names he'd heard mentioned as being interested in claiming that reward, and ministry pardon, it was no wonder Voldemort was making himself scarce. Harry had rendered him mortal and it now only needed one person to get lucky with a spell, potion or blade for the dark lord to be no more. With Harry offering the reward, it could even be construed as death by his hand. Albus watched as the anger flowed from his potions professor. He'd given Severus advice, now it was time for a warning.

"Severus, you cannot let your animosity toward Harry cloud your judgement in this matter. Any wrong doing on your part would undoubtedly lead to the involvement of the DMLE. My influence is not what it once was, I may not be able to protect you."

Snape couldn't help but return his gaze to the discarded newspaper scattered on the floor. "Headmaster, our world is changing. Neither influence, gold, wards nor walls would appear to protect anyone now. I'm afraid I can only act as my conscience dictates and will just have to live with any consequences."

As Severus left the office, Albus couldn't help but think that statement worried him more than any development printed in the Prophet.

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The British Government also had to contend with what appeared in the media. A Ministry of Defence D notice and the Official Secrets Act meant things were holding at the moment. Being able to release some good news also helped. Secretly, highly placed government officials were 'leaking' the real story, off the record of course.

The real story being that these terrorists were from a country very friendly to Britain. They'd mistaken their target when they attacked Crawley. This friendly government was appalled and had apologised at once, they had been dealing with the problem internally and hadn't suspected it would spill over into Britain. They'd apologised at once and were now doing all they could to help with the situation. The people injured in the attack had all been moved to a private hospital, receiving world class care free of charge. There was also a large sum of money set aside to help the bereaved and give the town of Crawley assistance in getting things back to normal.

The two governments had also worked closely toward the swift resolution of this problem. Citing the reason behind the request for anonymity was to protect the good relations this country had with the British people was believable, economies had been wrecked by less vile acts than the one carried out in Crawley. The real reason that the secrecy held though was the news they were able to release.

Due to the involvement of British Special Forces, the problem had been practically resolved. Of all the people who had taken part in the attack on Crawley, five were now dead with all but one of the remaining terrorists captured. One of the more obnoxious tabloids were so delighted with this news, they proclaimed that the matter could be summed up in one word.

A picture of the destroyed building that was once Malfoy Manor appeared on their front page under the headline 'Gotcha' This proclamation was then followed by a by-line claiming 'our lads' had taken them out. Without all the hard facts, speculation was running rife and some of the rubbish printed would have given the Daily Prophet a bad name.

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There was no press presence at the wedding of Nymphadora Tonks to Remus Lupin, both bride and groom were delighted at that. The guest list was very small for the muggle wedding ceremony. This was the same tiny church Tonks' mother had married her father in, seeing how happy her mother and father were together meant it had always been her dream to get married here too. The bride's guest list included her parents and a few friends, one of whom was her bridesmaid. Remus had settled for Minerva and the Grangers, neither wanted anything to spoil their day.

Tonks was radiant as she was led down the aisle in a traditional wedding dress by her father, Harry had half expected her to come dressed in something outlandish. Harry couldn't miss the expression of sheer joy on both the bride and groom's faces, he also noticed the look of longing on Hermione's. Perhaps it was time to move forward their plans?

Harry had thought waking up with Hermione beside him was his favourite thing in the whole world, only to have his world rocked by discovering what they could do when they were then awake. They would really have to talk about setting a date, but not until she was safely out of Hogwarts. That would be the time to discuss their future.

Harry tried not to think of the discussion he had with his two favourite elves after they approached him about them starting a family. Harry was totally lost as again, the elves apparently do things differently. Winky wanted babies, Dobby was available so Harry found himself being asked for permission. There appeared to be no marriage, love or even a bond where elves were concerned, just biology at its most simplest.

Harry finally got the gist of what Dobby had attempted to explain, since he and Winky were of House Potter then there could be no better environment to raise babies. This gave Harry the insight he needed to make his decision. Dobby and Winky may not love each other but they would be doting parents to any babies they may have. After being raised in the Dursley household, Harry thought any child of Dobby and Winky would be blessed to have such loving parents. Of course, he was always going to give permission. The difference now was that he could justify that decision to Hermione when she found out. Before having that discussion with his fiancée, Harry decided to wait until Winky was pregnant first.

He patted the pocket of his waistcoat for about the millionth time today to confirm that the wedding rings were indeed still in there, Remus was counting on him and Harry wouldn't let him down.

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Ron was sitting by himself down beside their old Quidditch pitch with his Firebolt across his lap. Like so many things in his life lately, the broom was brand new. Ron had spent most of his life coveting and

revering anything new. Now he had a new house, clothes, school books and a world class new broom. That was even before he took Lavender into consideration, his beautiful new girlfriend. Why then was he sitting here wishing things could go back to the old ways?

Days spent flying with Harry, Ginny and the twins while Hermione sat and read her book. Then they would all make their way into mum's old kitchen where they would enjoy one of her delicious meals. That was what Ron missed, the simple old days.

Their new house was undoubtedly beautiful, and mum certainly loved her new kitchen, but Ron now felt like a stranger in what used to be his favourite room. He missed the old kitchen of his childhood. Same issues applied to his new bedroom. It was bigger, brighter, with its own bathroom but he missed the old bumps, dents and posters that made it his room. At the moment it felt as if he was staying in that French villa, very nice but he wanted to go home now.

Then there was Lavender. This potential problem appeared to dwarf all the other ones combined, probably because he was helpless to do anything about the rest of them. He felt himself falling for Lavender Brown a little bit more each day.

When his girlfriend heard that there would be no issue of Teen Witch Weekly published, she blamed herself and went into a class one funk. Employed for two weeks and managed to put the magazine out of business was her reasoning.

When Ron pointed out the obvious, that she was sixteen and it was the editor's job to decide what got printed, it was like watching the dark clouds of depression leave his girlfriend. Ron thought this in itself was reward enough, Lavender though had other ideas. He'd walked around with a goofy grin on his face for the rest of the day.

This was the crux of Ron's dilemma, and the reason he was sitting here in contemplation. In a few days they would be returning to Hogwarts and the thought of Lavender not being on his arm was, he finally admitted to himself, inconceivable. What that would mean in terms of friendships, Ron didn't know. Worst case scenario for him was Hermione having a go at Lavender in his presence. He could perfectly understand Hermione's reason for doing so, this didn't mean he wouldn't instantly spring to Lavender's defence. Any row

between him and Hermione always had the potential to escalate, this one could be a doozy!

He was also aware of the tension in the Weasley household since Harry and Hermione politely refused the offer of a party at the new Burrow. Mum was really hurt and, although she hadn't said anything, Ron knew who she blamed for the situation.

Ron was shocked out of his musings by a voice he knew very well.

"Hey mate, if I knew you were going to just sit there and stroke it, I wouldn't have bothered buying you a Firebolt!"

He spun around to see his best friend standing behind him. "Harry! What...Why... Where's Hermione?"

"She's up at the house, catching up with Ginny and your mum."

Ron took a deep breath and plunged forward. "Harry, I don't know what to say about the attack..."

He was interrupted before he could say anymore. "Listen Ron, there has been a lot of mistakes made this summer. The important thing is to learn from them."

"How does Hermione feel about me still being with Lavender?"

Harry understood his apprehension, Hermione was not someone you wanted upset with you. "Well, Hermione was actually quite impressed. She thought it was about time you began to grow up!" He punched Ron playfully on the shoulder. Hermione did indeed say those words, Harry just omitted the bit where she expressed her disappointment that it was Lavender Brown he'd chosen to 'mature' with. Hermione was of the opinion Ron could do much better, Harry kept his own council on the matter.

"We've got thirty minutes until lunch is ready." Harry checked his birthday present from Dan and Emma. "Twenty-five now. Do you want to see what these brooms can do?"

Both shot into the air, Harry on Ginny's Firebolt, as a very fast game of chase unfolded. Apples were then snatched from the top branches of the trees as chase gave way to catch.



Ron wore a wide grin as he flew around their old pitch on his new broom alongside his oldest friend and thought things might not be so bad.

His mother's voice was soon calling on them for lunch so they flew down to the broomshed before setting off for the house.

"Ron, I need to ask you a favour?"

"Anything Harry, just name it."

"Well, with me not at Hogwarts this year, I'm worried that might be taken as an opportunity to attack Hermione. We've upset a lot of people this summer, people who may have children at Hogwarts. We both know Hermione can take care of herself but I would feel better with someone watching her back."

Ron was quite choked at the trust Harry was placing in him with this.  
"Harry, you know I've always got both your backs."

The two friends walked up to the Burrow, ready to enjoy the delicious lunch on offer and thinking everything was once more right with the world.

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 15

Harry was bemoaning having to travel over four hundred miles down from Glasgow to London, only to then have to come all the way back up on the Hogwarts Express. He was also bemoaning having to spend the next few weeks as an owl. It was going to be hard seeing all his friends and not being able to talk with them.

Hermione put a quick end to his pity party by kissing him and then whispering some good news in his ear. "I'm going to miss you so much, I think Puck is going to have to sleep with me every night that I stay in Hogwarts."

It was an enthusiastic and grinning Harry Potter who portkeyed with his new family to Grimmauld Place.

The Granger family got a taxi from there to Kings Cross station. Dan and Emma were wearing their slight glamours, it would be some time before the furore died down from their appearance in the British media. With their faces all over the news broadcasts and newspapers, they really couldn't go out in public without them. Puck was disillusioned and sitting on Hermione's lap in the taxi. Even in London, walking around with an owl perched on your shoulder was going to attract attention. Harry had refused point blank to consider a cage.

They found a reception committee waiting on them as they approached the station. The Longbottoms, Lovegoods and Weasleys were all there to greet them before they made for platform nine and three quarters.

Hermione couldn't fail to notice a rather pale Lavender clinging to Ron for dear life. She greeted all her friends and told Lavender they would chat later on the train. The group made their way through the barrier and it wasn't until they were actually on the magical platform that Puck became visible, now perched on Hermione's shoulder.

"Bloody hell Hermione, have you never heard of a cage? Is that bird going to be taking classes with us too this year?"

Hermione was quick to reply. "This from the boy who walked around with a rat in his pocket for three years?"

Luna was giggling as she held on to Neville's arm. "Oh I think we're going to see a lot of Puck this year. He'll keep us all on our toes."

They soon began to get uncomfortable with all the people staring at them so goodbyes were said as they made their way onto the train and claimed a compartment. Their parents were also doing a bit of catching up, three sets of them now had suffered an attack of some sort over the summer. They left to get a coffee, knowing their children would be safe on the train.

The six got organised in their chosen compartment before the prefects meeting began. With Ginny and Luna also wearing prefect badges, Neville was going to be left keeping Lavender company. Ron was very happy with that as he suspected Lavender might get a rough time from the other students, no one was going to bother her with Neville sitting there.

Seamus and Dean were the first to stick their heads in the door to confirm Harry wasn't returning, they may have been the first but they certainly weren't the last. Colin Creevey appeared only a step away from bursting into tears after receiving confirmation his hero wasn't returning to Hogwarts, the prefect's badge on his robes was of little consolation to the star struck young man.

Padma and Parvati arrived to comfort Lavender, and eye up Neville. Luna made sure to give him a kiss before she left for the meeting. Hermione had to order Puck to stay, giving the beautiful owl a peck on the cheek for obeying her.

The doorway had barely closed when Parvati started. "Where did Hermione get the gorgeous owl? She talks to it as if it was human."

Neville supplied the answer. "That's Puck, I think Harry got him for Hermione and he's a very smart owl."

Parvati was shaking her head in amusement. "Figures Hermione would get an owl to match her personality. Hey Neville, you and loony? I have to say I never saw that one coming."

Parvati had also never seen the new Neville Longbottom either, she was about to get a sneak preview and discover that picture in the Prophet was no fluke. "Miss Patil, I would remind you my girlfriend's name is Luna. She is one of the youngest ever recipients of our

societies highest award, an award she earned after spending her summer fighting death eaters and dementors. What did you do with your summer?"

Both twins were taken aback by this version of Neville Longbottom, Parvati was so upset she wanted to pounce on him right this second. Padma now understood Luna's appointment as a Ravenclaw prefect, the school had obviously learned from their mistake of not giving a badge to Harry Potter last year. When you had Luna receiving the Order of Merlin in Hogwarts tonight, it would be impossible to give that badge to someone else. That Luna was now friendly with the new Head Girl, Cho Chang, wouldn't hurt either. Padma thought anyone attempting to bully Luna this year was in for one hell of a shock.

Parvati managed to stop undressing Neville with her eyes and turned her attention back to her best friend. "How are you holding out Lavender?"

"Oh ok. Ron's been amazing and Hermione's going to have a chat with me before we get to Hogwarts. If she can forgive me then I think I can pretty much cope with anything else."

"You know Hermione's not one to bear a grudge Lavender, unless you deliberately hurt Harry. There has been many incidents over the summer, yours was just one of them."

Padma was in a thoughtful mood as she reflected on what her sister had been saying. "It's strange to think that Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle will all be missing this year. They're the same age as us but their lives are already over, what a waste!"

Neville felt no sympathy for the former Slytherins. "Cedric Diggory wasn't much older when he was murdered. Malfoy's father wasn't trying to hit us with tickling charms at the ministry that night, death eaters don't mess around. They attacked Hermione and paid the price, anyone attacking Luna is in for more of the same."

The determination in Neville's voice left none of the carriage occupants in any doubt he meant what he said. "They better hope I get to them first because Harry is all out of being merciful. Anyone attacking one of those three girls is going to quickly find themselves in a lot more trouble than they can handle."

Parvati wanted to know where this version of Neville had been hiding for the last five years, she also wanted to rip his robes off here and now. In her eyes, he'd just shot straight to the top of Hogwarts most fanciable list. As is usually the case though, he also had a girlfriend. She would just have to wait and see how things developed over the course of the year, Parvati would bet her allowance she wouldn't be the only one keeping an eye on Neville's availability.

Neville was actually relieved to see Luna return, she perched on his knee so there would be enough seats left for everyone else.

Luna was delighted she didn't have to move from this spot for the rest of the journey. "We're not needed for prefect patrols on the train today. It would seem they're afraid of any trouble from the other students so there are aurors patrolling the train all the way to Hogsmead."

Hermione took shrunken bags from her pocket and expanded them. "I have a final present here from Harry for the five of us."

Ginny removed an Acromantula silk set of dress robes from the bag Hermione gave her. They were jet black with the Weasley family crest placed above the Gryffindor one. The two boys were soon flung out the compartment with their bags and sent to the toilet to change.

Luna couldn't contain her giggles at the sight of Puck turning around to face the compartment walls when the girls began to get changed. The boys soon returned with their new robes on, both Patil sisters wolf whistled at them.

Neville made straight for Luna. 'You look amazing love.' No more words were uttered as the little Ravenclaw rewarded her boyfriend.

Parvati thought they all looked amazing but had a question for Hermione. "Is that the Potter crest you're wearing?"

"Well I am engaged to Harry! He thought we should show a united front when we collect our medals tonight. The ministry crew might be one short but this way Harry feels he can still be part of it."

"Are you collecting Harry's award?" As she said the words, Lavender's hand shot to her mouth in embarrassment. "I'm sorry Hermione, I know it's none of my business. I just can't seem to keep my big mouth shut."

Hermione decided to cut the girl a break. "Lavender, everyone in this carriage knows that's who you are, we're all still here! I'm bossy, Ron can be a right arse, Ginny's got quite a temper on her while Luna's Luna. We're all different but still all very good friends."

Ron had his arm around his girlfriend's shoulders as she appeared close to tears. Hermione smiled as she answered her question. "No Lavender, I won't be collecting Harry's award. He told me it was all taken care of and wouldn't say any more. You'll all find out what he's up to at the same time as me." Hermione had to consciously stop herself turning around to look at Puck when talking about Harry.

The carriage would have settled down at that if Parvati hadn't decided to stir the pot again. "Ginny, you're going to need a beater's bat to keep the boys away when they see you in those robes."

Ron was quick off the mark. "She won't need any bat, that's what big brothers are for."

Ginny pinned him with a stare. "I'm being awarded an Order of Merlin, I think I'll be able to fend off anyone I don't want chatting me up."

Parvati sensed an opening to learn a juicy piece of gossip and went for it. "Oh, and just who in particular do you want to be chatting you up?"

Hermione thought it was time to turn the conversation in a different direction. "Luna, how was your expedition? Did you and your father find what you were looking for?"

The little Ravenclaw was now gushing with her enthusiasm. "Oh yes, Harry's advice proved to be exactly what we needed. I'll need to thank him the next time I see him. They actually got so used to us that they would sit and let me sketch them, the next issue of the Quibbler has some of my drawings on the front page."

Hermione attempted to bite her tongue but eventually had to say what was on her mind. "Wouldn't it have been better to take photographs? Then no one could dispute your claims."

Luna appeared to be looking directly into Hermione's soul as she asked her next question. "Do I need a photograph before you believe me Hermione?"

There was no hint of hesitation or uncertainty in Hermione's answer. "Of course not Luna, but not everyone knows you as well as we do. A photograph is harder proof than a drawing."

Luna just shrugged that off and continued to snuggle into Neville, she'd certainly missed her boyfriend. "My friends believe me, what else matters? A camera flash would have frightened them away and we wouldn't have gotten to see them behaving naturally. Watching how they cared for their young was really fascinating, they are wonderful little creatures and I haven't seen daddy so excited in ages." Luna was looking toward Hermione but including Puck in her glance. "Be sure and let Harry know for me next time you see him."

The Patil twins had no interest in Luna's creatures so left the compartment to see what else was happening on the train. Their compartment was still busy though with students rubbernecking as they walked past or popping in to say hello. Apart from Harry's absence, the most noticeable difference was the phrase 'how was your summer' wasn't uttered the entire journey. Their exploits had been all over the Prophet this summer. Their annual visit from a group of Slytherins was neither missed nor commented on.

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Students arriving in the great hall were shocked to see another table set there, not half as shocked though as the ministry five who knew everyone currently sitting at it.

Dan and Emma Granger, Molly and Arthur Weasley, Xeno Lovegood, Alice, Frank and Augusta Longbottom with the newly married Lupins completing the line up. The remaining places at the table held place cards for the other Order of Merlin winners. Puck flew over from Hermione's shoulder to greet them, landing on Dan's outstretched arm.

Hermione was currently hugging her mum and it was hard to tell who was the more excited. "What are you guys doing here?"

Emma was delighted to finally see the place where Hermione and Harry spent most of the last five years. They'd been here since lunchtime and Remus had given them a guided tour. "What? Did you think they were going to hand out these things without your family present?"

Dan had to keep a straight face when delivering the next line. "Harry sent his apologies, he still refuses to come." Puck bobbed his head up and down as if he thought this was funny before retreating off to perch in the rafters so he could watch the show.

The Grangers were not only inside Hogwarts, they were going to witness the sorting, enjoy the welcome feast before then witnessing their daughter and her friends receive their awards. Watching the new first years being led into the hall, neither Granger parent had any difficulty picturing an eleven-year-old Hermione being as wide-eyed as these youngsters. They were thoroughly enjoying this experience, though that was not a view shared by everyone.

Albus saw his last faint hope fade into nothing as Miss Granger arrived without the presence of Mr Potter. With the minister of magic in Hogwarts to distribute their Order of Merlin awards, here was conclusive proof that Harry Potter was finished with the magical community. To refuse their top award, presented by the minister was a snub that would burn his last bridge to their society. Albus could see no way back for the boy now.

As the sorting finished, the headmaster stood. "I would like to extend our welcome to the new first years who joined our Hogwarts family today, we all hope your stay here will be a pleasant and productive one. To those students returning to their Hogwarts family, you may have noticed we have some very special guests with us tonight. This summer has been like no other I can remember and a lot of that is due to the people sitting at our extra table tonight. We'll get to that after we've enjoyed tonight's feast, tuck in."

With the minister of magic sitting beside Dumbledore and an entirely new table inside the great hall, the returning students weren't short of topics to talk about while they enjoyed their meal. That Harry



Potter wasn't on the train was a surprise to some, that he wasn't here to collect his award was a surprise to many. Hermione Granger wearing the Potter crest and engagement ring was expected by most.

Fudge found himself actually enjoying his meal. Yes Harry Potter not being here undoubtedly took some of the shine off tonight's ceremony. Thinking back to that fateful night when you-know-who paid a visit to the ministry, Cornelius was delighted to still be in a position to hand out awards. That he managed to avoid being asked to retire was probably his greatest achievement to date. His popularity had certainly weathered the summer better than the headmasters.

Matilda was sitting at the staff table with her witches' hat pulled down to her eyebrows. While the lightning bolt scar refused to heal, she couldn't return to work at the ministry. Dumbledore had somehow swung her a secondment to Hogwarts where she would spend her time in an administrative position. What the headmaster had omitted to tell Matilda was that Minerva had refused to continue doing it for him. Their relationship had fractured to the point where she told him to do his own bloody work.

Severus was sure he would need a potion for indigestion by the time he made it back to his quarters. One glance at the extra table was enough to have his innards twisting with resentment and barely contained anger. Had Potter actually been present, Severus would probably have vomited his partially digested meal all over the staff table.

Muggles inside the great hall was bad enough, that they were here to see Potter's insufferable mudblood receive magical societies highest award had the potions master tasting his own bile in his mouth. Running his eyes over the rest of the group offered little reprise as they were no better, a pair of Weasleys, looser Lovegood and that squib Longbottom. If any of them thought that their award would see Severus Snape ease up on them in his class, they were in for a rude awakening.

The real bitter pill for him though was the werewolf. Seeing Lupin sitting there with his new wife, about to receive an Order of Merlin before starting in the job Severus had coveted for years was almost too much for him to bear. That the werewolf who tried to kill him now

sat there with everything he himself wanted out of life left Severus Snape thinking that there was no justice in the world. The head of Slytherin had no idea he was destined to discover how wrong he was.

The only thing Cornelius liked better than addressing an audience was addressing a captive audience, this one couldn't go anywhere until he was finished. Most of these youngsters still retained that sense of awe, generated mostly from their excitement that the minister of magic would actually speak to them. With a large press contingent here tonight too, this was about as good as it got for a politician.

He had also decided to keep his derogatory comments about Potter not having the decency to turn up here tonight to a minimum. Cornelius extolled the daring deeds and heroism of the people he was about to hand these awards to, enthralling the youngsters in the audience with his presentation. As the recipients were called up to receive their awards, the applause was thunderous.

When the minister had only one more medal to present, he once more played the audience. "As Mister Potter couldn't make tonight's ceremony, for whatever reason, I suppose it would be fitting if his fiancée accepted it on his behalf."

Hermione didn't step forward as the hand resting on her shoulder stopped her, the last person she expected then walked past her to speak.

"Actually Minister Fudge, I've got that covered." Those inside the great hall of Hogwarts were about to be introduced to the new Neville Longbottom in a manner they would never forget.

"During the summer, Harry asked me for a favour. As we were on our way to St Mungo's where he then healed my parents, you better believe my answer was yes."

This got a chuckle from his friends and a smile from his parents. Neville though was just getting started. "You see, all summer long the headmaster had his spies watching all Harry's friends in the hope of capturing him."

Neville turned to face Matilda. "Did you really think Hermione wouldn't recognise the witch who stole from her? I suppose the headmaster advised you against wearing a turban? At least you've only got Harry's mark under that hat and not Voldemort growing out the back of your head!"

There was general outrage at this as Matilda ran from the hall in tears. Dumbledore appeared ready to interrupt but Neville just ignored him and turned back to face the minister, with the entire hall now hanging on his every word.

"Harry wanted the ministry to at least be consistent with these awards. They've already given one to Dumbledore, the man who tried to run his life. Peter Pettigrew also got one, the traitor who cost him his parents. Harry now wants to complete the set and would like this one to be awarded to the death eater whose actions pointed Voldemort at the Potters and Longbottoms, Severus Snape!"

Severus jumped to his feet, only to find himself facing a plethora of wands. Not all of them were current holders of the Order of Merlin, there were three Longbottoms who appeared more than ready to curse him if he as much as twitched an eyebrow.

Neville walked calmly toward his potions professor, knowing his friends and family had his back gave him enough confidence to face anything. He took the hated man's hand and slapped Harry's medal into Snape's palm. "Wear it with pride professor, the person that earned it is already more of a man than you'll ever be."

Severus was well aware every pair of eyes in the hall were now focused on him, as well as quite a few wands. His eyes though never left Longbottom.

Neville just stood there, holding himself straight and proud without a trace of fear. His confidence in his friends and family giving him the strength to stand up to his tormentor, and banish forever this man's power over him.

Severus glanced down at the precious object in his hand before answering the boy. "Mr Longbottom, be sure to thank Mr Potter for me the next time you see him. Unfortunately, I must refuse his offer. This prestigious award obviously means so little to him that I can

only reciprocate by treating this item with the contempt that I was shown when it was so rudely presented to me."

Severus Snape threw Harry's Order of Merlin onto the floor of the great hall before leaving with his head held high.

Fudge watched as his prestigious, and vote winning ceremony descended into farce. He could see the reporters writing away like crazy and Cornelius didn't need to be a seer to know what part of tonight would make the headlines. It was time to deflect the blame away from himself and place it squarely where it rightfully belonged.

"Dumbledore, do you know what young Longbottom here is talking about?"

There were currently an entire hall and especially three Longbottoms that were waiting to hear the answer to that question. Dumbledore had no intention of telling the truth but hadn't counted on Miss Granger supplying the answer.

"The prophecy that was made could have applied to two boys, my Harry and Neville Longbottom."

Alice, Augusta and Frank were nodding in agreement, they knew that much. The next bit floored them.

"Voldemort found out about the prophecy because one of his death eaters, Severus Snape, heard it being made to the headmaster. Snape revealing this to his master led directly to the Potters being murdered and the Longbottoms being targeted."

Augusta Longbottom was out for blood. "Snape was freed solely on the word of Albus Dumbledore."

Tonks Lupin was also distinctly unhappy at these revelations. "Sirius was left to rot in Azkaban without a trial while Snape walked free on someone's word. Am I the only one that smells something rotten here?"

Cornelius now saw his way clear of this fiasco. "No, Senior Auror Lupin, you're not. I think it's high time these allegations were investigated. If Mr Potter would contact Madam Bones with the

details, I'm hereby authorising her department to examine this matter in minute detail."

The minister knew everyone was still listening and this should ensure at least he had put a positive spin on the situation, a positive spin for him that was.

With impeccable timing, a snowy white owl flew into the hall, Hedwig circled once before heading for her target. Minerva McGonagall removed the scroll from the owl's leg. Silence then fell as all awaited the next phase of tonight's entertainment, including Hermione who had no idea what Harry was up to.

Hedwig flew over to her as Puck descended from the rafters and joined the snowy owl, landing on Hermione's other shoulder. Their display was enough to draw a comment from Ginny.

"Those two are very friendly, will we be seeing chicks in the future?"

This comment had Luna bursting into giggles. "Ah Ginny, I think it's safe to say these two are very fond of each other but Puck's heart belongs to another."

Both Puck and Hedwig nodded their heads in agreement before cuddling into Hermione. This display left the few people in the know wondering just which owl was the animagus, Hedwig was a very smart bird.

Minerva was now fighting to maintain her composure as she stood to speak. "As most of you will now have surmised, Hedwig just delivered a letter from Mr Potter. I'd like to read it to you now."

Albus certainly didn't want that to happen, especially without him being able to read it first. His problem though was he couldn't think of an acceptable reason for stopping Minerva.

I'm sorry I can't be there with you tonight but well-publicised reasons prevent me from entering Hogwarts. I expect Professor McGonagall gave the new first years the – your house is your family – speech before they were sorted. Of course she's right and it's that family I'll miss most tonight. I also made friends in other houses and would advise our new first years to try and do the same.

Now for the real reason for Hedwig's visit. I wanted to be remembered inside Hogwarts for something more than being Poppy Pomfrey's most frequent customer, the following shall be my legacy.

Hermione was glaring intently at Puck but was finding it impossible to win a staring contest against an owl.

Due to bad management, the publication known as Teen Witch Weekly recently went bankrupt. It was purchased by me and is my gift to Hogwarts. I want the name changed to Teen Weekly and some articles in there that us boys can read too. I expect the first couple of months it will be purely a school magazine but use this time wisely, learn from your mistakes and I hope it will go nationwide in time for the Christmas edition.

Should this be the case, arrangements can be made with my fiancée Hermione Granger and I will give an exclusive interview for that issue. This magazine should be something that crosses boundaries of house, gender and blood. It will only be successful if everyone works together to make it so.

With that I hope you enjoy your year at Hogwarts, at least this year you have a defence professor who will let you use your wand!

This actually received a round of applause as the excitement of producing their own magazine appealed to everyone.

Minerva waited on the applause dying down before she continued. "Mr Potter asked if I would oversee this project and it's something I'm now looking forward to being involved with. Notices will soon appear in your common rooms with details on how you too can get involved in one of the most exciting things to come to Hogwarts in years."

This was again met with applause and Dumbledore was left trying to restore order and asking the prefects to lead their houses off to their common rooms.

With four of the award winners being prefects, Minerva and Filius had already made alternative arrangements to give their students more time with their families. Frank currently had his arm around Neville's shoulders.

"I'm so proud of the way you handled that tonight son, you played it brilliantly."

"Neville was braver than you think Frank. When I taught here the last time, Snape was your son's Boggart. I think we can safely say Neville has dealt with that."

Albus had intended to reprimand young Neville for his behaviour against Matilda and Severus, he could now see that would be about as welcome as serving Hippogriff shit with custard. A little sweetness and colour still couldn't disguise you were serving up shit. He'd been concerned Severus might do something rash before tonight, now he decided to go and have a chat with his potions professor.

Minerva made her way over to the group of award winners. "Can I just say I'm really proud of all of you, even if Mr Longbottom here appears to have developed a taste for the dramatics."

This raised a few laughs before the head of Gryffindor had some serious words with Hermione. "I honestly can't thank Harry enough for the opportunities he's just given the students of Hogwarts. All the supplies and equipment will be delivered this weekend. Please thank him for me when you write about the minister's promise of an investigation."

Hermione was standing there with an owl on each shoulder and trying not to chuckle. "I'll be sure to send a note off with Hedwig tonight."

Minerva showed Hermione what she had in her hand. "I lifted Harry's medal from where that person threw it. With your permission, I would like to put it on display in the Gryffindor common room. I can only hope one day your children might see it there."

"Professor, I'm sure that's an idea Harry will love. Please place mine beside Harry's, the two medals should always be displayed together."

Minerva accepted Hermione's medal as Ron added his two knut's worth. "I would love to do that too but mum has already got a space set aside to display both mine and Ginny's in the new Burrow."

Neville also thought this was a great idea but everyone had already seen him present his to his gran. Luna didn't think the Gryffindors, or the Ravenclaws for that matter, would want to see hers displayed.

They were allowed to stay with their families until just before curfew. Hugs were exchanged before they had to part. The Weasleys, Longbottoms and Xeno accompanied Dan and Emma to the edge of the Hogwarts wards. The Grangers portkeyed back to Harry's house in Glasgow while the others apparate to their homes.

-oOoOo-

Lavender was almost bouncing off the dorm walls with excitement by the time Hermione made it back. "Hermione, did you know Harry was going to do that with the magazine? Do you think McGonagall will let me work on it? Oh I'm so excited, I just can't believe he would do something like that."

"Breathe Lavender, breathe. The first two names I thought of when McGonagall announced that tonight were yours and Colin Creevey's, I'm sure Harry would have thought the same." Hermione made her way over to the window and opened it wide, it only took seconds before Puck flew in and landed on her waiting arm. She closed the window and then turned around to find both her dorm mates staring at the young witch with her owl.

Parvati was the one who voiced their concerns. "Hermione, do you plan to let that owl spend the night in here?"

"Harry gave Puck specific instructions to watch over me, I think we all know there are people in this castle who would like to do me harm. Puck will warn me of any trouble coming my way."

"Surely you don't expect anyone to attack you in Gryffindor tower, far less our dorm?"

"Parvati, that woman sitting at the staff table tonight spent her summer under an invisibility cloak and following every move I made. Harry sent Puck to me with a letter and she appeared from nowhere to steal it right out of my hand, I never even got a chance to read the bloody thing."



Both girls were now seeing Hermione's situation in a new light, a female member of staff could easily gain access to their very dorm.

"She was following us about Crawley when Harry hit her with the same curse he used to mark Voldemort, you can imagine she's not too happy about that and now Dumbledore has brought her into the castle."

Her dormmates could now see the sense in Hermione having a guardian watching over her while she slept. They had no idea Hermione was spinning the situation to suit her needs. "I'll keep my bedcurtains closed and would advise both of you not to stick your heads through them. Puck is a very gentle creature but is also very protective and has quite the pair of talons on him. That would probably be the first thing anyone sticking their heads through the curtains gets to see."

Hermione let Puck rest on her headboard before closing the curtains and heading off to the bathroom to get ready for bed. She wondered if Harry had brought pyjamas with him and then decided she definitely hoped he hadn't.

-oOoOo-

Severus paced up and down in his Hogwarts apartment, an apartment it was now clear he would soon be leaving. There was no way his crimes could withstand more than the most basic of investigations, just as there was no way Potter wouldn't write to Bones asking that there be one.

Albus had reckoned that any investigation would begin within a matter of days, leaving Severus only that small amount of time before everything came crashing down on top of him.

His pride though wouldn't let him leave without causing Potter the greatest harm possible, he didn't care what risks he had to take in achieving this goal. Severus Snape wanted revenge.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was snuggling with Harry in her bed, he'd just shown her he thought her idea for keeping her dorm mates away was brilliant. Both knew Lavender and Parvati were the two nosiest people in the

school, they were also two of the vainest. There's no way they would risk a scratched face just to see what Hermione may be up to.

Although Harry had expressed his joy at her idea, Hermione wasn't too pleased with some of his from earlier on this evening. "'What the hell was that all about with Neville and Snape?'"

Harry was relieved they had erected silencing charms around the bed. He told his fiancée the story. "When the idea of rewards was first muted, Neville was originally going to tell them from me to stick it up their arses. As it built over the course of the summer to where it became Order of Merlin's, I knew I couldn't do that."

Hermione snuggled in further, waiting to hear his reason.

"Remus needs his Order of Merlin to be allowed to teach, Neville got a big boost in confidence from his. His award might actually help Ron get over that crippling inferiority complex we both know he has, so you can see I was stuck."

Hermione tried not to snigger, only Harry could find himself in such a dilemma.

"Then I remembered Snap drooling at the prospect when Fudge mentioned giving him one for supposedly capturing Sirius, I knew right then what I wanted to do. I'll bet my dad and Sirius enjoyed that tonight."

"Your dad and Sirius might have loved that tonight, they don't have to put up with the man teaching them potions. Snape was always going to be a nightmare, he'll be worse now."

Harry held her close to him as he explained why he had to do what he did. "Hogwarts needs Snape gone, and hopefully he'll bring Dumbledore down with him. When I was talking to Poppy at my birthday party, she was really excited that I'd taken an interest in healing. She told me St Mungo's is crying out for healers but were facing a problem. To gain access to their healer program, one of the things you need is an outstanding NEWT in potions. Very few outside Slytherin achieve that result, purely because of Snape's prejudices and bullying."

Hermione couldn't argue with any of that as Harry continued. "Dumbledore is too short sighted to see the harm his manipulations are having on the magical community of Britain."

She quickly reached a decision. "If I have a potions class scheduled before Snape gets investigated, I'm pulling a sickie! I would even chance taking some of the twins' products to make me sick. On second thoughts, just being in the potions lab with Snape would probably make me sick."

Harry gave his fiancée a deep kiss. "Don't worry love, I'll be beside you every step of the way. Now I'm the master of all three Hallows, nothing and no one can see through my cloak. You're stuck with me from now on."

Hermione thought that was the best thing she'd heard all night. Eventually both of them did manage to fall asleep.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 16

Hermione's mind was made up, she was going to torture Ronald bloody Weasley to within an inch of his life. She thought it would be fitting punishment for the torture she was currently having to endure. Her day had started off so very well too.

As far as Hermione was concerned, any day she woke with a near naked Harry Potter in her bed was a day that was off to a brilliant beginning. She intended to have a quiet word with Dobby and Winky to ensure Harry never owned a pair of Pyjamas again. She so preferred him in her bed without them.

This brought up another problem that she would have to discuss with Harry later, Hermione never wanted to wake up without her man beside her again. She also had no intention of sneaking about behind her parents' backs and felt it was time to solve the problem once and for all.

Her new timetable had been a pleasant surprise. Double defence with Remus started the new school year off fine. This was followed by double transfiguration and then an afternoon of Arithmancy. Harry had gotten bored by then and Hermione found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on magical mathematical formula with his invisible hands gently rubbing the small of her back. He would be rewarded for that later.

She wasn't timetabled for potions tomorrow either and, with Harry sending his note off to Amelia Bones this morning, Hermione was hoping Snape would be gone before her scheduled lesson on Wednesday. Puck had flown with Hedwig last night until the snowy owl was safely away from Hogwarts and well on her road to Glasgow before returning to 'stand guard' over Hermione. A school owl took Harry's request to the head of the DMLE this morning.

Yes, today was going so well until she discovered Ronald had swapped his scheduled prefect rounds tonight, leaving Hermione to endure patrolling the castle with an amorous Anthony Goldstein.

Hermione knew she was going to have to slap this plonker down hard, and soon too before Harry broke his cover and decked him. Anthony was top of his year in Ravenclaw, which usually meant top of your year in Hogwarts. Unfortunately for Anthony, that position

belonged to a certain Hermione Jane Granger. Without using the intelligence for which his house was famed, Anthony had arrived at a solution that was fatally flawed.

His simple solution might even prove fatal if he persisted with it, Hermione should date him and they would be the top couple in Hogwarts. She was currently having to listen to this useless wanker mouth off about how he was obviously the best choice of partner for her, totally ignoring her engagement ring and the Potter crest on her robes. When she forcibly pointed this out to him for at least the twelfth time, Anthony gave that smug little smile that left her wanting to pull all his teeth out without offering the aid of anaesthetic.

"It's ok Hermione, when Padma told me it was you who requested our prefect rounds be changed, I was able to read between the lines. I can also totally understand why you wouldn't want to walk around the castle with that uncouth Weasley. What Brown sees in him I'll never know..."

It was then the penny dropped for Hermione. Lavender wanted time alone with Ron, Parvati speaks with Padma and lover boy here thought he was on to a good thing. Ron Weasley better enjoy himself tonight. After she was finished testing those curses she found in the library back in third year, for witches who wanted to avoid amorous advances, he wouldn't be much good to Lavender for at least a month.

Anthony couldn't miss that this girl wasn't paying him the attention he felt he deserved. "I'm sorry Hermione but for this to work, you need to be a little more cooperative. Relationships are all about give and take."

Hermione had about all she could take from this arse and was just about to give him something he surely wasn't expecting when her day suddenly got really bad.

Two body bind charms shot out from the shadows ahead and hit them both. Anthony went down backwards like a felled tree while Hermione's golden Puck did its job and the curse merely bounced off her. This froze their two attackers into inaction for a split second and that was all the time Hermione needed, her wand was in her hand and a blasting curse was glowing from its tip. Just before the

curse was released, Hermione felt as if a gorilla had grabbed her forearm, her blasting curse saw chunks of masonry fly off the ceiling.

She didn't have time to worry about that though as the gorilla's other arm snaked around her neck and squeezed, the hold was so tight Hermione's feet left the ground as two people emerged from the shadows to stand in front of her.

Theodore Nott was really angry while Pansy Parkinson appeared to be terrified, Granger's blasting curse had missed her by a matter of inches on its way to creating a crater in the ceiling. Had Millicent been one second slower in grabbing the bitch, Pansy could see she would have been severely injured. Granger wasn't playing around. She was beginning to doubt this plan, Potter's rage would be something to behold and, like Granger, he appeared to be finished playing and now working to his own rules.

Theo though was not for wavering now that he had his prize. "Granger you stupid bitch, I wanted to take my time and enjoy this. That blasting curse means I'll have to hurry."

Theodore had the supreme confidence of one who always gets what he wants and never suffers any consequences for his actions. He spoke to the clearly frightened Anthony who was lying on his back, unable to move anything other than his eyes. "Goldstein, I'll show you how you treat a mudblood. I might even give you a shot at her when I'm done. A couple of memory charms and you can even take the blame for it. All that really matters is that Potter's bitch will be ruined and everyone will know about it. You and your friends hurt all of our family's this summer, now it's payback time."

Theodore reached out to grab the front of Hermione's robes, intending to rip them open, when there was a flash of steel.

Hermione's vision was blurring at the edges and in danger of going totally black from the choke hold the gorilla had on her when something warm and wet splashed over her face. She thought there was screaming but it was hard to concentrate on anything else but getting out of this death grip. The arm on her throat slackened slightly and that was enough for Hermione. With a last supreme effort she put every ounce of strength she currently possessed into pushing that colossal choking arm away. She didn't meet the

resistance she expected and Hermione found herself slipping onto the floor, a floor that was now wet and slippery.

Anthony watched in helpless horror as his fellow prefect was about to be raped in front of him. That was until a sword flashed from nowhere and Nott's arm below the elbow was now lying on the floor, unattached to its former owner. Blood was spraying everywhere as Nott screamed and thrashed about, Parkinson was then hit in the head by a curse that threw her into the air like a rag doll in a storm. She smashed off the corridor wall before hitting the floor in a heap.

Bulstrode must have loosened her grip in the ensuing panic because Granger escaped and she too dropped to the now bloody floor. That sword wasn't finished its gruesome work for the night though, it flashed once more and the arm that was choking the life out of Granger joined Nott's lying unattached on the corridor floor.

The screaming had now reached horrendous proportions as Harry Potter appeared in the corridor, the look on his face would have been enough to silence anyone but the two spells he cast at Bulstrode and Nott completed the task admirably. He was suddenly down on his knees beside the girl who wore his ring.

"Hermione love, are you ok?"

A gargled "What kept you?" was all she could manage.

Harry's glowing hand was gently massaging her injured neck and throat as he explained what had happened. "I had to take care of Snape first. He'd set the whole thing up and was back there to provide cover for his Slytherins. If I'd known what he intended to happen here, I would have killed the bastard where he hid."

He helped a shaky and bloody Hermione to her feet. "Time to go love."

Hermione nodded her agreement before Harry turned his attention briefly to Anthony. "Tell Dumbledore I'll be paying close attention to discover just whose idea this attack was. If it was his, tell the old bastard I'll be coming back for him."

Anthony never doubted for one second that Potter meant every word of that, he watched as he led his girl away and his heart nearly stopped when Potter paused and glared directly at him.

"Oh and Goldstein, do you need a reminder that this young lady wears my ring?"

Anthony stared at this figure who stood there with one arm around his girl while the other held a lethal sword that was still dripping blood. He discovered he only thought he was scared before, his new level of fear had given him the power to fight the body bind as he desperately assured Potter he got the message. He also managed to piss himself at the glares coming in his direction from this couple, Anthony was never as glad to see two people leave in all his life.

After all the screaming and spellfire, it could only be moments before this corridor was full of people, Anthony couldn't wait.

Harry was leading Hermione upward and she understood his reasoning, the doors leaving the castle would be the first place they would search for them. Harry burst out onto the top of the astronomy tower and Hermione ran right into the back of him, she couldn't yet see what had caused him to stop so suddenly but she could feel the rage pouring off him.

"You useless, selfish bastard!"

The spell left Harry before Hermione could see what it was, far less what he was aiming at. When she did finally see, Hermione was wishing she hadn't.

Ron was standing there, trousers at his ankles while Lavender's bare legs were wrapped around him. Both had turned their heads to see who had come crashing through the door and Harry had frozen them in situ. Hermione could quite happily spend her entire life without ever laying eyes on the pale spotty bare arse of Ronald Weasley.

Harry though was as angry as Hermione had ever seen him.

"I asked you to watch her back, first prefect patrol and you fuck it up. They were waiting in a corridor to rape her, that prick Goldstein would probably have enjoyed watching."



That Harry still had the sword and his magical aura was actually flaring with his anger was a pretty terrifying sight, it certainly scared the coupling couple.

Harry placed his sword in its scabbard as his voice became so cold, it could have frozen hell itself.

"You've let me down for the last time Ron, you deserve everything that's coming to you. C'mon love, it's time to put an end to this nonsense once and for all.

A helpless Ron and Lavender watched in horror as a blood-splattered Harry and Hermione stood on the parapet of the tower, the look of determination on Hermione's face was intense. Ron was screaming inside as they both dove off the tallest tower in Hogwarts as the waiting night swallowed them whole. He was still silently screaming when McGonagall found them spell-locked in that compromising position ten minutes later.

Harry's intention was for both owls to fly outside the Hogwarts wards and use Hermione's portkey to take them back to their home in Glasgow. Puck began to lose altitude but a screech from Naida told him his love had other ideas, he was certainly not going to refuse any chance to fly with her.

Hermione had been more than interested on how Harry came up with her name, she giggled as his eyes practically glazed over as a memory hit.

"Seeing you in that white bikini, leaving the swimming pool at your parents' villa in France was a life changing moment for me. I felt like such a pervert watching you through the telescope and couldn't wait to hold you, that awe inspiring sight forced me to take action."

His eyes refocused on her as he continued. "You move through the water with such ease, Naida is a beautiful water sprite and I thought described you perfectly. That you now fly through the air with the same skill you move through the water makes your name even more apt."

Considering the other bird of prey in Harry's life was named after a famous witch he'd read about in a history of magic book, Hermione loved her owl name.

Both owls soared over the forbidden forest, flying until they reached a large body of water. This was now the longest flight Naida had undertaken and the adrenalin rush from earlier was long gone. It was a beautiful night though and Hermione now recognised where they were, her tiredness evaporated as a plan formed. She led Puck up the large loch toward the lights they could both see twinkling in the distance. Hermione's plans now included how she wanted this night to end, their house in Glasgow probably wouldn't allow those plans to reach fruition.

This was how the young couple found themselves checking in to an Inverness hotel, after Harry had cast a few cleaning charms and transfigured their clothes of course.

-oOoOo-

Albus found himself once more heading toward the infirmary, this time though it was the most serious situation he'd faced yet. He had two students missing limbs while all three Slytherin attackers now wore Harry's mark on their forehead, as did Severus. He'd tried his best to warn his potions professor but Albus was now overwhelmed by the proof Severus hadn't heeded that warning. He could see no way out of this for Severus unless...

Albus had composed his features by the time he reached his potions professor's bedside. "Severus, I can't say how disappointed I am in you. What you attempted with Miss Granger was despicable and cowardly. There is no way I can protect you after these actions."

Severus sat stoically in bed as he answered. "I understand headmaster, I assume the aurors are on their way?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he gave an answer Severus was not expecting. "Not yet, I wanted to have a chat with you first. I may have a way to solve all our problems."

Albus now had the man with the bleeding forehead's complete and undivided attention. For once the headmaster didn't procrastinate but got straight to the point, time was of the essence here.

"Mr Potter has just unknowingly given you a golden ticket that will allow you to get close to Voldemort. When it becomes public knowledge you also bear Potter's mark, he's sure to summon you. That you will surly be being hunted by the DMLE by that point will also lend credence to your case too."

Snape was looking at Albus as if the old man had finally lost his remaining few marble. Why the hell would anyone willingly go near that psycho? He'd nearly killed him the last time he'd been summoned and he had no intention of ever going back. Azkaban may not be pleasant but dead was forever. His days of being a spy were over.

Albus could see the doubts Severus was expressing as the twinkling in his eyes increased in intensity. "Voldemort is now mortal and there are great rewards for the person who brings him down. The hardest part will be getting close enough and you have just been handed a great advantage there."

It suddenly hit Severus what Albus was implying. Getting marked by Potter would get him closer to the dark lord. Killing him would see all his crimes swept away with a ministerial pardon. That there was also half a million galleons to be had from the Potter brat certainly sweetened the deal to his taste. He would be a free man and, with that sum of gold behind him, able to do whatever he wanted. Compared to rotting his arse off in Azkaban, it was a very tempting option.

"Ok Albus, how do we play this?"

The twinkling eyes had settled down to a gaze that would cut through steel. "I'm sorry Severus. As I said earlier, I can't help you in any way. As headmaster, my first duty is to the safety of the students under my care. As soon as I've ascertained their condition, I will be heading to my office to floo the DMLE. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Snape nodded, understanding at once. Albus couldn't help him anymore than by offering a slight delay in calling the aurors. The instant the headmaster went behind the privacy curtains around Bulstrode, Severus was out the bed and heading out the infirmary. He needed to get away from the castle and lay low, taking time to

consider his options concerning the dark lord. He was certain Albus was right and he would be summoned, he needed to plan for how to deal with that.

A part of Albus was well aware he'd just sent Severus on what would be considered by many as a suicide mission, he justified it to himself by asking what other choice did he have? The dark lord had to be vanquished and Severus was of no use to him sequestered in Azkaban, this way Albus had a chance to accomplish both goals. Both he and Severus were well aware that, when the DMLE got a hold of Severus, only a ministry pardon would keep the potions master out of Azkaban.

Albus tried to concentrate on his other problems, Harry Potter being inside Hogwarts without him knowing was top of the list. Mr Goldstein's information that Harry would be watching closely to see who ordered the attack was also a worrying development. That Harry could even consider that Albus Dumbledore would resort to something like that showed how far their relationship had fractured. Harry's real question though would be whether Voldemort ordered it or Severus acted on his own hatred. Albus was really left with no option but to separate himself from Severus.

The headmaster also had severely injured students to deal with, Harry had been brutal in his treatment of Miss Granger's attackers. Poppy had informed him that neither limb would be able to be reattached to its owner, the magic in the blade preventing this procedure. All three attackers would face serious charges while Mr Potter had acted within the law while protecting his fiancée's virtue.

Miss Granger had very publicly worn the Potter engagement ring and the family crest on her school robes. As her attackers were all purebloods, they therefore couldn't claim they were unaware she was under the protection of house Potter. That the entire incident was witnessed by another pureblood, Mr Goldstein, sealed their fate and would quickly close the matter for the DMLE.

Miss Granger leaving Hogwarts before she reached seventeen would almost certainly be overlooked. Her birthday was in two weeks and she could easily claim that time was spent recovering from her attack inside the castle.

Albus was also struggling to understand the two Gryffindors' claims that the escaping couple had jumped off the astronomy tower. The area had been carefully checked and no sign of them had been found. Albus was left to conclude that the charm that locked them into that compromising position must have had an element of the confoundus about it too. If Harry could walk around the castle right under his nose, fooling two students as to his method of escape wouldn't exactly be a difficult task for the young wizard.

Minerva had investigated the matter fully and discovered the only motive behind Mr Weasley's switch of prefect duties was the request from his girlfriend to spend some alone time with him. While this may have cleared Ronald from any conspiracy in the attack, it didn't stop Mr Longbottom setting about the Weasley boy the instant he discovered the details of what happened with Miss Granger.

Yes, this was a very serious incident that would have major repercussions inside and outside Hogwarts. Noticing Severus' bed was now empty, Albus started toward his office. It was time to call the DMLE, he couldn't cover this up even if he wanted to.

-oOoOo-

Harry entered the bedroom after his shower to find Hermione on the phone to her parents. Despite repeated assurances she was ok, Harry could clearly hear Dan's voice shouting even though it was Emma on the other end of the phone.

"Give me the phone love, you go and get your shower."

Hermione gladly passed the poisoned chalice onto Harry and headed off into the bathroom.

Dan had also taken the phone off his wife and didn't even give Harry time to say hello before boring into him. "Harry, you told me my daughter would be safe. We trusted you and now we hear she was almost raped! What the fuck happened?"

Harry understood Dan's anger perfectly, he shared it totally. He'd managed to release some of his though with the help of a certain blade. "Dan, the bastard that tried to lay a hand on our girl found his arm lying unattached on the corridor floor. The bitch who had

Hermione in a choke hold suffered the same fate. If they had as much as torn her robes, I would have killed them where they stood."

There was a moment's silence at the other end of the phone before Dan spoke again. "Outstanding answer Harry, outstanding."

With Dan now a little calmer, Harry took the chance to explain the situation. "Her necklace worked perfectly and only Bulstrode being such a crap witch that she had to physically grab Hermione prevented our girl from wiping the floor with them. I was just along the corridor dealing with the bastard who planned the whole thing and shot straight back to lend Hermione a hand."

"Harry, I was going to make a joke about disarming them but my heart really isn't in it tonight. We've been worried sick since we left you last night. Just tell us you're both finished with that place?"

"Yes Dan, we're both done with Hogwarts."

"That's all I wanted to hear, I'll hand you over to Emma now."

Emma's concern was still there though. "Harry, if Hermione's fine, why are you in Inverness and not here?"

"She really is fine Emma, Hermione just wants a little time to put this behind her. She phoned in case you heard the news from another source, we didn't want you to worry."

"Do you think Voldemort ordered or arranged this Harry?"

He answered as honestly as he could. "That's a possibility, I'd like to rule out Dumbledore but the man has a history of manipulating me to do what he wants. He wants Voldemort dead and blaming him for any attack on Hermione would see me go after him with everything I had."

Harry could see any of those scenarios as possibilities, but thought that's all they were. "My best guess would be Snape acting on his own and out for revenge. We'll soon know one way or the other. If Dumbledore doesn't cover this up, it will be all over the Prophet."

Emma could see Harry's point, she'd taken an instant dislike to the sour faced man the only time she'd seen him. "Ok Harry, say

goodnight to Hermione for me. Stay safe and phone us in the morning."

Harry promised they would and said goodnight before hanging up the phone, only to find Hermione standing there wearing nothing but a towel.

"Harry love, it's time. I want it to be tonight."

"Are you sure Hermione, after what nearly happened earlier..."

"No Harry, that's not the reason. I never wish to wake up alone again. I want to be yours for the rest of our lives, I think our new lives should start tonight." Hermione's towel dropped onto the hotel room floor, taking with it any objection Harry might have made about taking advantage of her situation. He stood and wrapped Hermione in his arms as his own towel soon joined its mate on the floor.

Harry's voice was barely above a whisper but the emotion contained was colossal. "How does getting married on your seventeenth birthday sound?"

Hermione kissed him with all the passion she could muster before answering. "Like too long a wait!"

-oOoOo-

Minerva McGonagall had a problem, she'd effectively just lost both Gryffindor sixth year prefects. The head of Gryffindor hadn't wanted to award the badge to Mr Weasley in the first place but Albus had blocked her preferred choice. Mr Weasley being caught like that with Miss Brown had just proved her point and cost the male prefect his badge. Mr Potter's immobilisation charm was so powerful she almost had to call on Filius to help her overcome it, all the while having to see two of her students joined like that while trying to concentrate. She had begun to wonder if a bucket of ice cold water might have been a better idea for separating the couple.

A quick search had soon discovered all Miss Granger's things had been removed from her dorm, those two elves of her fiancée's were something else. This confirmed to Minerva that Miss Granger wouldn't set foot back inside Hogwarts again, she could hardly blame the girl.

Her problems were compounded when she offered Mr Weasley's natural replacement the prefect's badge. When Mr Longbottom heard where Mr Weasley was when Miss Granger got attacked, the young man had emitted quite a few profanities while attempting to pummel a certain redhead through the nearest wall. He was now joining the other two on detention and Minerva had an additional letter home to write.

With Miss Brown's behaviour obviously ruling her out of contention, her only other choice of female prefect then outright refused to have anything to do with the position. It was hard to refute Miss Patil's claims that she had no wish to be raped in a corridor. Mr Thomas and Mr Finnegan also ruled themselves out of the vacant male prefect's position, Minerva also couldn't refute either of their claims that they were barely passing classes at the moment without the added burden that being a prefect brought with it.

In all her years at Hogwarts, this was a situation that no head of house had ever faced before. She had no idea this was only the tip of the iceberg that was about to strike Hogwarts.

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Harry was holding a sleeping Hermione in his arms and silently promising to have a word with Dobby and Winky to banish all Hermione's sleepwear, he much preferred his fiancée just as nature had intended her. His eyes were drinking in her beauty when he saw her smile.

"See something you like Harry?"

"I like everything I see love, are you ok?"

She kissed his cheek. "Harry, stop worrying because I feel wonderful. I wish we'd taken the time to actually think about contraception but I will never regret what we did."

Harry's blush wasn't the response Hermione expected, she expected to see him worried.

"Hermione, I cast the contraceptive charms, on you and me." Her pause and surprised expression caused Harry to ramble. "My dad



taught me the charms, then Sirius pulled me aside and taught me them too. As if that wasn't embarrassing enough, my mother then explained some things to me and taught me them again. I could probably cast them in my sleep..."

Harry's ramblings were stopped by virtue of Hermione covering his mouth with hers. When the kissing was finished, she had a question for him. "Love, how long are these charms of yours effective for?"

"At least forty eight hours, why?"

"Oh good, just checking we didn't need to cast them again."

There was no more talking for a while.

-oOoOo-

Emma answered the phone to a clearly excited Hermione. "Mum, get the elves to pack a bag for you and dad. We'll meet you in Edinburgh. There are trains running between the two cities all the time and Harry has made reservations at the Balmoral Hotel, it's right next to Waverly station."

"Hermione, what's going on? Why Edinburgh?"

"Mum, everything's way better than fine. It's not something I want to discuss over the phone so we'll explain it all when we meet you there. Harry and I have left Hogwarts so will be doing things as normal as possible from now on. We'll be taking the train down from Inverness so it will be this afternoon before we get there, there's no need for you and dad to rush."

The joy coming through the phone line told Emma her daughter was indeed fine so she decided to cut her some slack. After facing every woman's worst nightmare last night, Emma was prepared to cut her all the slack she needed. She could also understand travelling from Inverness by train. Emma had no idea what the situation would be with Harry protecting Hermione in the manner that he did, it was a safe bet though that there would be no magical people looking for them on the Inverness to Edinburgh train.

It was the proposed meeting in Edinburgh that intrigued both Grangers, they were certainly up to something but what?

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From the moment Emma climbed up the steps leading out of Edinburgh's Waverly station, she fell in love with the majestic building that was the Balmoral Hotel. The sheer old world elegance of the place flowed over her senses like the finest chardonnay. From their greeting by the doorman in traditional highland dress to being led to the suite Harry had reserved for them, everything was an experience and Emma felt a little like Alice in Wonderland.

Looking out the window certainly lent credence to being involved in a fairytale. The magnificent castle, set proudly on top of the extinct volcano, would certainly grace any real-life princess. With parts of the castle over nine hundred years old, it was not difficult to imagine the historic upheavals those famous walls had seen.

Emma had wanted to visit the Balmoral Hotel since reading that her favourite author wrote the ending of her last book here, she wondered if the view had inspired her creative juices as she wrote about a battle for life and death in a famous fictional Scottish castle.

Dan was also a little overawed, but for a totally different reason to his wife. It was one thing for multi millionaire authors to stay here but they were merely the Grangers, two dentists from Crawley. "You know Emma, it's times like this I'm reminded of just how wealthy Harry actually is. This must be costing him a fortune but I'll bet he never even asked the price. He has all that money yet he doesn't let it define who he is."

This earned Dan a kiss from his wife. "Finally getting it are you? Harry Potter is a special young man, and not just because he loves our daughter. Both would be happy just being a couple of students, as long as they were together. I honestly think they are a couple who are going to have a massive effect on the world around them and it's got me asking myself, what are we going to do with our lives?"

Dan was a little confused by the turn this conversation had taken so Emma took his arm and they sat on the sofa facing the open fireplace, the dancing flames having a soothing effect on both of them. Emma was well aware what she was proposing would change their lives out of all recognition but felt it was time.

"Dan, my life changed in so many ways the day our practice was destroyed. I already felt we'd been given another chance to have our Daughter back in our lives, now I'm determined to be a big part of theirs."

She took a moment to steady herself before the next bit. "Dan, I can't go back to being a dentist in Crawley, I don't even know if I can go back to being a dentist."

Dan could tell this was not some whim for Emma but something she had been working up to, he could only let her get it off her chest and see where it led. He had a pretty good idea what his wife was talking about, for the moment he would wait and see if he was right.

Emma tried to explain her feelings to the man she loved. "Watching Harry in that hospital ward was life changing for me as well as the people he healed. How could anyone not be affected by witnessing something like that? I understand no one but Harry can do that, well perhaps Hermione when he trains her, but I so want to be part of the team that helps. I've done the supportive mother bit – oh really dear, a basilisk can petrify you say – and I'm utter shit at it. Those two deal with things so far beyond our understanding it terrifies me sometimes. I don't want to be a passenger either, I want to earn my place on the team."

Emma looked into her husband's eyes and saw nothing but understanding there, giving her the courage needed to say the next bit. "I want to go back to university and study whatever form of medicine will allow me to help them the most. Our current degrees would get us into forth year on most medical courses. Do you think I'm crazy, taking this on at our age?"

It was now Dan's turn to offer reassurance by kissing his wife. He answered her as honestly as he could. "Like you, I was certainly affected that night. I would also have to agree with you about going back to Crawley and rebuilding our practice, it's not something I think I could face. I think we're both different people now."

Emma was smiling but couldn't help thinking there was an enormous BUT coming along soon.

"I also want to be part of a family that has four of us in it, we've just got Hermione back and I will not lose her again. I would be very surprised if Harry doesn't have some long-term career plans he's yet to share with us. Can I suggest we wait and see if I'm right before committing ourselves to something. We already have a wide range of skills between us that should allow us both to fill major roles in our expanding family."

Emma snuggled in to the man she loved, content in the knowledge that they would face things now as a family and her days as a dentist in Crawley were over. They sat there in comfortable silence, awaiting the arrival of their daughter and the young man who was destined to be their son-in-law.

Hermione had said they would be here before dinnertime, the loose plan at the moment was to have a chat and then go down to dinner. For the moment, that was enough to be going on with.

There were soon hugs all around as Harry and Hermione entered the Granger's suite. After both parents repeatedly had confirmation that their daughter was indeed fine, Emma couldn't contain her curiosity about the positive energy cascading off Hermione any longer.

"Ok Hermione, I want to know why all the mystery? There's a perfectly good house sitting empty in Glasgow yet we're staying in an Edinburgh hotel, and just why are you walking on air?"

Hermione was bursting to tell them but couldn't resist a bit of teasing. "Harry and I are getting married!"

Emma rolled her eyes. "Hermione, we were there when he asked you and held an engagement party, I think we already know that."

She couldn't contain her excitement any longer. "Harry and I are getting married this Saturday!"

This time Emma's eyes rolled for an entirely different reason, Dan was alert enough to grab his wife and sit her back down on the sofa. It took a few minutes, and a trip to the mini-bar before Emma's colour was back at anything approaching normal.

There was nothing wrong with her mind though, it kicked into gear after the shock. "Hermione Granger, how can you possibly get married this Saturday? There are so many practical things that need to be taken into consideration, not least of which is you need a dress."

Harry stood there thinking that if this was their only objections, then they were home and dry. "Emma, problems like that disappear when you throw money and magic at them. There are plenty of shops in Edinburgh, or didn't you notice?"

Dan though had an entirely different point of view, and wasn't slow to voice it. "I would like to know the reason behind this sudden rush, and it better not contain the word grandchild."

"Dad! Not for a few years yet. I want to be with Harry, He wants to be with me. We have no intention of sneaking around behind your backs, nor will we ask you to accept something I know neither of you would approve of. We all knew this was coming, it's just the date that's moved."

Emma's brain was stuck on the one fact. "But you're both only sixteen!"

Hermione though wasn't giving an inch. This was something she wanted with all her heart. "Yes mum, which is the legal age to get married in Scotland, the country where both Harry and I intend to live. We have an appointment at the old blacksmith's in Gretna Green this Saturday, we can only hope you'll be there."

The fierce determination Hermione was displaying was like an electric shock to her parents. They could see that their daughter couldn't be swayed from this course which forced a decision on them. Since they already accepted this relationship of their daughter's was going to progress to marriage, the decision wasn't too difficult for the parents to reach. Dan's answer though was almost a growl.

"No one but me will be giving my daughter away on her wedding day. We'll be there."

"Kilts!" All eyes now were on Emma to explain her sudden and somewhat strange declaration.

"Kilts. We're in Edinburgh, it's a Scottish wedding and I think our men would look so cute in them."

If that's what it took to win Emma's approval for Saturday, Harry was quite prepared to humour his very soon to be mother-in-law. Emma's wink at Hermione meant that both his and Dan's fates were already sealed.

With both Granger women now in full planning mode, they had dinner delivered to their suite as the complimentary hotel stationary took a pounding as list upon list was created. Neither parent brought up the subject of where Hermione would be spending the night, both already knew the answer and weren't too concerned. Hermione would be Mrs Potter in a few days.

-oOoOo-

Hogwarts on Wednesday morning was still reeling from the aftershocks of Monday evening's attacks on two prefects doing their rounds. Anthony Goldstein would describe the events in great detail to anyone who stood long enough to listen, the corridor ended up running in more Slytherin blood with every retelling.

The tension between the rest of the school and the house of the snakes had never been higher. The reasons why the headmaster and head of Slytherin were missing from the hall were now all over the front page of today's Prophet. Nott, Parkinson and Bulstrode were all very quick in blaming Snape for ordering the attack, it didn't stop the aurors arresting them.

Amelia Bones went crazy when she discovered there had been a considerable delay after the attack before her department was contacted, a delay that allowed Severus Snape to escape. She didn't buy Dumbledore's excuse of ensuring the welfare of his students for one second and he to found himself arrested. At the moment the charges were allowing Snape to escape, Amelia fully expected those charges to increase in number and seriousness as the investigation progressed.

Ron and Lavender's location and the activities they were involved in during the attack were revealed to everyone in a Molly Weasley howler that was probably heard in Hogsmead. They were perched at

the end of the Gryffindor table, a good few spaces left free before the next student felt comfortable sitting near them.

Neville and Ginny were sitting with Luna at the Ravenclaw table having breakfast, not one Ravenclaw raised an objection. Padma had spread the story of what Neville had said would happen if anything happened to any of the girls, Anthony had given them all an eyewitness account of just how bad that could be. Ginny and Luna could probably have walked into the Slytherin common room and not one student would say anything.

Neville though wasn't taking any chances, after what happened with Hermione, neither girl was getting out of his sight until Snape was captured. Both girls had returned their prefect badges, as had quite a few others. With Nott and Parkinson also being the Slytherin prefects, all prefect duties had been suspended until further notice and there would now be aurors patrolling the corridors at night.

He escorted both girls to defence, only leaving when he spotted Remus already in the classroom. He promised to be back at the end of the lesson. Neville didn't care if this behaviour cost him house points or detentions, anyone trying anything with Ginny or Luna was going to have to go through him first. When a Hogwarts head of house gets his students to attack another, the question of security inside the castle was shown to be the farce Harry's friends were becoming to expect.

Luna and Ginny had enjoyed their lesson, right up until Professor Lupin asked them to stay behind after class.

"Both of you, and a certain Mr Longbottom, have earned a weekend of detentions with me and my wife. Report here on Friday after your last class. You'll have time to go to your dorms to change but don't worry about dinner, that will be taken care of. The dress code is casual muggle, or so a certain elf told me."

Luna caught on immediately, emitting a squeal of delight and hugging Remus.

The marauder couldn't contain his laugh at the girl's excitement. "Miss Lovegood, I'm pretty sure a student cuddling a Hogwarts professor is against the rules. Please save it for the young man who just entered."

Neville had heard Luna squeal and rushed into the classroom with his wand already drawn, he wasn't quick enough though. Luna was on him in a flash, wrapping her arms around him and still managing to jump for joy.

"We're going to see Hermione and Harry on Friday!"

Remus nodded his confirmation to the two Gryffindors whose excitement then matched Luna's. The marauder though had a word of caution for them. "This is a secret guys, tell no one outside this classroom. Dobby will get the parental permission slips signed and I'll cover the school side, we don't want this getting around."

The trio quickly agreed and left the room with wide smiles on their faces. Even after what happened, their friends were keeping in touch.

A/N Thanks for reading



## Chapter 17

Harry and Dan were using the outdoor seating of a rather nice café, having a much-needed cup of tea while watching all manner of life pass them by on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. Both could probably have done with something slightly stronger but, while it was legal for Harry to get married in Scotland at sixteen, he had another two years to wait before he could legally drink alcohol. The pair had just left the highland dress shop where the rather distinguished older gentleman who owned the establishment had initially been less than impressed with them.

Both Dan and Harry had thought there would be nothing more to their day than walking into a shop and asking for a few kilts, finding out how wrong they were had taken hours. Choosing what tartan they would wear was their first stumbling block.

The shop's owner had explained the situation to them in a tone of voice that told Harry and Dan he must have said this speech at least once every day for many, many years.

"There are no rules about wearing a specific clans' tartan but custom dictated that you wear your own, providing you have one."

Harry's eyes had zeroed in on a tartan that could practically have been designed with Gryffindors in mind. On seeing what clan it represented, Harry soon mentally vetoed that idea before he even mentioned it to Dan or the proprietor. The tartan was Clan MacMillan and, while nothing against Ernie, Harry didn't want anyone's thoughts to drift in that direction during their wedding.

"What happens if you don't have a clan tartan? I'm pretty sure the Potters don't have one."

"Well young sir, the Royal Stewart Tartan is considered to be the Monarch's tartan. As you both are her subjects, you are perfectly entitled to wear it."

On first sight of the beautiful red tartan, both quickly agreed. This was the colour and design that Harry and Dan associated with Scottish tartan. They foolishly thought that their job was now complete, they soon found out differently.

Style of sporran, belt, kilt pin, socks, flashes and gillie brogues had all to be chosen, and that was before they got to shirt, tie and jacket.

When Harry then dropped the bombshell that they wanted two full dress sets for each of them by Friday, they thought the old man was going to cry. Harry then pulled off a completely different kind of magic by offering to pay for any extra costs this incurred. Suddenly all their problems disappeared.

Harry provided the owner with a copy of the Potter family crest and was assured that there would be kiltpins and badges made to that design by Friday. There was such a turnaround in the old guys demeanour that he even offered to provide white heather buttonholes for all four outfits. They both thought that would be great and one less thing for them to deal with.

Dan and Remus were reasonably close in height and build, Harry and Neville weren't too dissimilar either. Winky would be able to perform any alterations needed to either outfit in minutes. The little elf would also be performing the same service for Luna, Ginny and Tonks.

Harry and Dan thought it was a stressful few hours but they could now relax, their shopping was over and it was definitely a case of mission accomplished. Both thought they had looked good in their outfits and couldn't wait to see their other half's expressions when they first laid eyes on them.

The Balmoral Hotel staff had also come through big time for the young couple, they were organising the entire reception. Hermione had loved the room they offered, it looked onto Edinburgh Castle. She quickly narrowed down a choice of menus, picked their wedding cake from a brochure and decided a string quartet would provide the music for their dancing. There was also a wide range of pre-wedding facilities and activities that she was more than happy to book.

A stretched limo would collect the entire wedding party from the front steps of the hotel and drive them all down to Gretna. Apparently the procedure was to drop most of them off at the old blacksmiths before driving around the village and returning to allow the proud father to lead his daughter to her wedding. The hotel also offered to secure the services of a first rate photographer who would record their special day for posterity. Harry and Hermione were very

impressed with the service while Emma pointed out that they don't award hotels five stars for nothing.

Harry had also arranged with Dobby to bring the jewellery from the Potter and Black vaults so the ladies could have their choice. Hermione already had the diamond necklace and earrings to match the Potter engagement ring but Harry didn't want to leave anything to chance. There were plenty jewellery shops in Edinburgh if they couldn't find exactly what they were looking for from the vaults.

All things considered, Harry was feeling pretty pleased with himself. That was when Dan asked the question that had him cringing.

"Emma and I know you and Hermione's short term plans, but where do you see yourselves in say, ten years?"

As the person who was soon to become his father-in-law, Harry thought Dan had the right to expect an answer. It was time to speak his dreams out loud to someone other than Hermione. "That's a very big question that has to take into account lots of if's, but's and maybe's. Hermione and I have discussed this only in the loosest sense but I think I can give you some idea of where we hope to be."

Dan smiled as he considered the old adage, 'if you want to make god laugh, tell him your plans'. "That's fine Harry, I can assure you this last summer has turned out totally different than what I imagined it would be."

This had Harry returning his smile. "Funny that, so has mine. I have a wondrous gift Dan that compliments my saving people thing, I have the ability to heal others. You might have realised by now that I'm also pretty wealthy, this will allow me to help even more."

Dan could find no fault with either of those statements. He'd seen with his own eyes what this young man could do with his healing hands, there was also no disputing his wealth.

"I, sorry we intend to start a charity foundation that will see hospitals built in some of the poorest countries in the world. I'm not talking about the large city hospitals we have here in Britain, they will be more akin to what we would call clinics."

Dan could see the excitement and enthusiasm oozing out every pore of his future son-in-law, but this was also backed-up by a huge amount of steely determination.

"We have no intention of just signing cheques and then standing back to let someone else to do the work. Hermione and I intend to be there from the very start, seeing the hospital built and working there ourselves until we have good staff in place to run it for us. Then it will be time to move on to the next one. We intend to spend our lives travelling the world, helping as many people as we can."

When he'd told Emma that the kids would surely have some plans, Dan had never considered anything on this scale. Harry wasn't finished though.

"I understand what a great offer the government is making to us and we will become involved in some research projects. I have a real need to heal people though and that's where our main focus will be, can you understand that Dan?"

Any lingering doubts Dan had about this young man joining his family vanished like mist faced with the heat of the midday sun. Here was someone with the talent, wealth and conviction to potentially make the world a better place. Well, at least the small corner they happened to be in at the time. "Harry, that sounds wonderful and I can more than understand it. What I was wondering though was if you had room for a couple of aging dentists anywhere in this organisation you intend to build?"

Dan felt a pair of arms go around his neck as his daughter kissed him on the cheek. He wasn't sure how long she'd been there but Hermione had at least heard the last bit. "Dad, it was my job to convince you both to become involved. We're years away from that yet though, there's the not so small matter of becoming qualified as doctors first."

Emma sat in the empty seat beside Harry and her expression was all business. "I don't have any intention of being a passenger on this journey, I want to help as much as possible. I'm willing to retrain to whatever we need and I'll get you for that 'aging dentist' comment later Daniel Granger."

Hermione sat as well as Harry ordered more drinks. "Mum, as I just said we're years away from that yet. We don't know ourselves what will be involved but having a connection to the government can only help when it comes time to begin setting up our clinics."

Both parents were happy to know that Harry and Hermione wanted them involved with this grand project, they could work out the finer details as ideas gradually turned into plans. Dan decided to change the conversation in the hope his wife would forget his quip about their ages. "So, how did my two favourite girls get on with their shopping?"

The wide smiles told their own story.

-oOoO-

The dark lord now found himself in a terrible bind after that blasted Potter brat posted the history of Tom Riddle all over the press. Not to mention that massive reward placed on his head with a ministry pardon to go along with it. To top it all, his secret anchors were no longer secret, or even anchors. Voldemort didn't know where to turn next.

That he was currently stuck with only Wormtail to aid him perfectly illustrated his current dilemma. Any death eater worthy of the name would sooner or later make an attempt on his life, thus he was restricted to the useless, but too terrified to act, Wormtail.

That one of his most competent death eaters was currently on the run from the ministry, and also bore Potter's mark, should have been a welcome boon. The only problem with that situation was that it felt a bit too contrived to Voldemort, something was amiss here.

Only one factor had him even considering calling the potions master to his presence. The dark lord had rummaged around inside Snape's mind and plainly seen for himself just how much Severus despised the Potter boy. Bearing Potter's mark would be as painful and degrading to Snape as it was to himself.

The prudent thing to do would be a little investigating behind the scenes first, at least his remaining servant should be able to handle that. "Wormtail!"

-oOoOo-

Ron couldn't miss the changes in Ginny, Luna and Neville, all three were now going about the school with a spring in their step. Neville breezed through his detention, whistling happily as he scrubbed the toilet Filch had assigned him.

Unlike the howler Ron had received from his mother, Neville had gotten a letter from home saying his parents were proud of the way he'd stood up for his friends. The same letter also gave him carte blanche to do whatever it took to keep both girls safe, points lost or detentions gained be damned. They were writing to McGonagall as well, making her aware of their opinion on the matter.

It would appear that most of Hogwarts agreed with that opinion as Ron found that he and Lavender were effectively on their own as no one else wanted to even speak to them. Ron couldn't find it within himself to disagree with this opinion.

Harry had predicted Hermione would be in danger and asked Ron to watch out for her. Lavender breathing in his ear that she had something special planned for them that night had some devastating effect on him. Any thoughts of Hermione Granger were banished from his mind in an instant while all available blood rushed south.

Ginny had accused him of making decisions with his wrong head and she was right, that wouldn't appear to be a problem for the near future though. Having McGonagall stand there and cast counter curse after counter curse at his bare arse just might have cured Ron of that affliction forever. He had no way of knowing if McGonagall had cast something sinister on him deliberately but, ever since that night, little Ron had resisted all efforts to be anything other than little.

Ron also found himself being unable to offer Lavender much comfort when their escapade cost her any chance of working on the new school magazine. He himself discovered no one in Gryffindor wanted him on the Quidditch team. Even owning a firebolt couldn't get him a trial. What use was a super fast broom when no one else wanted to be in the same team with you? He knew more than most that Quidditch was all about teamwork, there was no room for anyone who couldn't be counted on to do their job.

Ron also understood things were really bad for him in Gryffindor when Cormac McLaggen was more popular than he was.

-oOoOo-

Darla Parkinson sensed someone else was in the room with her but really didn't give a shit. If they had broken into her house to commit robbery they were going to be disappointed, Darla had nothing left for them to take. She took another sip from the tumbler of firewhiskey that she clutched in her hand before speaking.

"Are you going to stand there all night or are you actually here for a reason?"

Peter could see this woman had been drinking for quite some time. He moved where she would be able to see him as apparently she couldn't be bothered to turn around.

"Our master sent me to discover what happened to your daughter and Snape..."

This was apparently the wrong thing to say as the whisky glass shot from her hand and just missed his head, smashing on the wall behind the intruder.

"Don't dare mention that greasy bastard's name in my house. He's ruined my daughter's life over his petty feud with Potter, the coward didn't even have the balls to do it himself. He may wear Potter's mark but he better hope the aurors get their hands on him before I do."

Darla summoned a replacement glass and then poured herself another stiff drink. "That mark on Pansy's forehead ruins her just as effectively as if she'd shagged a centaur in the great hall during lunch. No wizard will ever want her now, she's marked for life."

The distraught woman took a good hit of the firewhiskey before continuing. "First it was her betrothed murdered by muggles, quickly followed by her father being arrested as he sat at this very table. Now she herself will probably see the inside of Azkaban. No, I will not have that name mentioned in my house. He took away the only thing I had left."

Peter was supposed to come here and ask this woman questions but he had nothing at his disposal to threaten her with. He also felt he'd seen all he needed to. Strange as it might appear, Darla was actually coping better than Glenda Bulstrode. She was practically suicidal because of what had happened to her husband and her little girl.

It was time to get back and report his findings to his master.

-oOoOo-

Tonks had privately mentioned to Amelia that she had been invited to meet with Harry this weekend, the senior auror suddenly found her work calendar clear. The head of the DMLE only requirement for this action was confirmation that both he and his fiancée were ok, Tonks couldn't see Harry having a problem with that and quickly agreed. As the party of five made their way toward the Hogwarts gates, all they knew was that Dobby and Winky would be waiting for them there. They had no idea what they were getting themselves into.

The elves popped them into the Grangers' suite at the Balmoral and chaos reigned for at least ten minutes. Harry and Hermione were hugged almost to death while all the time being bombarded with question after question. Dan and Emma finally got everyone seated before Tonks stood once more.

"Let me get the official bit out of the way first, then I can relax and just be myself." She cleared her throat dramatically before continuing. "Lord Potter, the DMLE thanks you for your swift action that prevented a heinous crime being committed against your fiancée. All three attackers have confessed their intentions and Mr Goldstein's testimony will be more than enough to convict them. Severus Snape is being hunted for his part in the crime and Albus Dumbledore is currently enjoying ministry hospitality in one of our holding cells for allowing one aforementioned greasy bastard the opportunity to escape. You will face no charges for your actions that night and Amelia has asked if I could let her know that you both are ok?"

Harry was smiling as Tonks had just confirmed his opinion on how the ministry would react to him slicing off a couple of arms. "Thanks for that Tonks, one less thing for me to worry about."



Harry then stood and mimicked Tonks' actions from earlier. "Now, I also have an official bit that needs doing too. The delectable Miss Granger here has finally set a date for when she will change her surname to Potter. Nev, will you be my best man?"

The grin he received back from his friend was as wide as his face allowed. "Proud to Harry, just say when and where?"

"Well actually, it's tomorrow at Gretna Green."

It was left to Hermione to break the silence Harry's announcement had generated. "No, my future husband is not joking. Luna, Ginny, would you stand with me?"

The chaos of earlier was now merely a curtain raiser, here in all its glory was the main event. Kisses were now added to the hugs and questions as the entire evening was spiralling out of control before Emma took command. This was her daughter's wedding being planned here, there would be order.

"All of your outfits for tomorrow are in your rooms. Can I ask everyone to go and try them on so Winky can make any last minute alterations that are necessary? we'll all meet back here and then go down to dinner at seven."

Harry and Hermione then led everyone to the rooms they had booked earlier. Hermione though was nervous. "We tried to guess the sizes as best we could. Sorry you didn't get any input into these choices, we just decided to get married after that night we left Hogwarts and there wasn't time to contact you before now."

Luna was so excited just to be involved, she'd wear a sack if she had to. "Relax Hermione, I'm sure we'll love whatever you've picked."

Tonks and Remus found their clothes hanging in garment bags and clearly labelled, she took hers through to the large bathroom so she would have more room to change. Tonks was very pleased at what she found in the bag.

There was a very smart jacket and skirt suit, matching shoes and handbag with three different tops for her to choose from. Tonks

ended up dithering between two of them and decided to ask her husband's opinion.

"Remus, I like this red one but..."

Tonks couldn't speak, the sight of her husband standing there bedecked in full highland regalia was doing something to her insides. Her breathing was obviously affected too as she panted out her question. "Remus, how long until we have to meet the others for dinner?"

"Just under an hour, why?"

"Oh I suddenly have this irresistible urge to discover what's under that kilt. C'mere husband."

It was two rather flushed Lupins who joined everyone before they headed off to dinner. Tonks may have been a metamorphmagus but even that wasn't enough to hide her blush when Emma asked if they liked their clothes.

Emma smirked before whispering to the younger woman. "Don't worry about it, same thing happened to me earlier when Dan came back with his. What it is about kilts I don't know but my knees were like jelly."

Luna and Ginny were raving about how much they loved their dresses, that was until they discovered just what Harry and Neville would be wearing. Emma was filling everybody in on the details as the excitement mounted.

Harry had a quiet word with the Lupins. "Remus, you're my last remaining link to my parents, would you and Tonks stand in for them tomorrow?"

Remus could only nod by way of an answer, his emotions were all over the place tonight as Tonks held his hand. He eventually found his voice. "Harry, I know your parents and Sirius would have been so proud of you."

"Our loved ones never leave us Remus. They will be there with us tomorrow, watching me marry the girl I love. I just hope they take a holiday while Hermione and I are on honeymoon."

Remus was now chuckling. "Good luck with convincing Sirius to leave you in peace."

"We both know my mother is more than a match for my dad and Sirius combined, she'll make sure we have our privacy."

The banter continued like that for the rest of the evening but one subject wasn't mentioned. The tradition whereby the bride and groom don't see each other on the day of the wedding, right up until the ceremony. No one was foolish enough to believe these two were going to be parted tonight. Harry hadn't seen his bride's wedding dress, and wouldn't until tomorrow, but that was as big a nod to tradition as the couple would be giving.

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Ginny and Luna were in their shared room snacking on the contents of the mini bar, neither expected to get much sleep tonight. Both were far too excited over what was taking place tomorrow to even consider closing their eyes.

Ginny had trouble removing her eyes from the fabulous dress that she would be wearing tomorrow, not to mention the jewellery Harry has provided. She was going to look like a princess at the wedding, and the only downside was none of her family would get to see her.

That it was going to be a muggle ceremony was always going to exclude most of them but this was going to be especially hard on Ron. When the news broke, Ginny was certain her mother would blame him for the rest of them being excluded. Another howler with her brother's name on it would be winging its way to Hogwarts.

Luna drew Ginny out her musings. "I didn't like to say earlier but I have no idea what a spa morning is, do you?"

"Not a clue, the way Hermione and Emma were talking though, it must be something good."

-oOoOo-

Excitement was running at fever pitch by the time the wedding breakfast came around, this was the room they would use for the

reception and it already had decorations and flowers set. Luna and Ginny now understood what was in store for them and the five ladies there were looking forward to their morning of pampering in the hotel's spa before the make-up and hair team arrived.

Dan couldn't help but think that Harry was the most relaxed groom he'd ever seen. Emma meanwhile appeared only moments away from meltdown. The mother of the bride was checking over details she'd previously checked at least twice already in the last half hour. She was in dire need of some relaxation, thankfully her morning schedule should provide it.

Dan himself was surprisingly calm, he put it down to the summer they'd just survived. His daughter had almost been killed at a battle in the ministry of magic, then there was an attempted rape while she was at that bloody school. He'd personally watched her leave for battle twice and their dental practice had been blown out from under them. Compared to that, walking your daughter up the aisle toward the man she loved was a pleasure to be savoured.

The menfolk decided to spend their morning taking a stroll along Princes Street and then down into Princess Gardens, making the most of the uncharacteristic autumn sunshine in Edinburgh. They gave the castle a miss though, all had quite enough of Scottish castles for the moment.

-oOoOo-

Harry stood alongside Neville and Remus, kicking their heels in the hotel lobby. All three were dressed for the wedding. They were waiting on Dan fetching the ladies down so they could leave for Gretna. The ladies had commandeered the Granger suite as their dressing room for the morning, leaving Dan to get dressed alongside Remus in the Lupins' room. Harry had kept Neville company and got ready there, he didn't want anyone seeing the room he and Hermione shared. Dobby and Winky had prepared it as their bridal suite and Harry thought it looked beautiful, Hermione would love it.

Beautiful didn't even begin to describe his bride as she slowly made her way down the elegant staircase, on her beaming father's arm. Neville had to begin his best man duties early by reminding Harry to breathe, the sight of Hermione had sucked all the oxygen out the Balmoral lobby. Every pair of eyes in the busy lobby were locked on

the girl who was about to become his wife, Harry didn't blame them in the slightest. She was an incredible sight.

Her dress was strapless, leaving her shoulders and arms bare. The bodice was intricately and exquisitely embroidered with the dress then flowing unadorned from her hips without any of the usual frills or embellishments Harry had expected. It appeared to be made from pure white satin as there was a definite sheen reflecting from it. As far as her future husband was concerned, the simple style of her wedding dress just enhanced Hermione's beauty.

Her hair was worn up and was complemented by a diamond tiara that matched her necklace, earrings and engagement ring. Harry wouldn't discover until later tonight that her golden puck was worn around her left ankle as her dress swept right to the floor. She'd chosen not to wear a veil, which allowed him to get lost in her sparkling brown eyes as she slowly made her way toward him. The groom did however notice that she'd chosen a mixture of red and white roses for her bouquet, an obvious reference to how Harry had told his wife to be that he loved her.

As Dan was dressed exactly the same as Harry, he was given a sneak preview of how they would look at the altar. The Royal Stewart tartan matched Hermione's bouquet and Harry thought the tartan sash over the left shoulder, held in place by the silver Potter family crest, looked fantastic. The black Prince Edward Jacket, white shirt and black bow tie added greatly to the occasion.

Heather is an intrinsically Scottish plant and white heather is regarded in this country as being lucky. The buttonholes looked fantastic and who was Harry Potter to turn down some free good luck.

The photographer was also covering this phase of the wedding but his flashgun almost had Harry reaching for his wand. He'd forgotten everything just staring at the vision that would soon be his wife.

-oOoOo-

Ginny was sitting in the back of the stretched limo as it smoothly made its way out of Edinburgh and headed south. Her father had liberally used expansion charms on their old Ford Anglia but this non-magical car just took that principle to the extreme. The décor

and a bar was taking it too far in her opinion, her dad would be drooling over it though.

It was hard to concentrate on anything else other than Harry and Neville in those outfits. She'd had to grab Luna's arm as they made their way down the staircase. Had her friend not been wearing such a long dress, Ginny wasn't sure if she would have managed to stop Luna sliding down the banister to get to Neville quicker. She certainly smudged her carefully applied make-up by almost snogging Neville in the hotel lobby.

Tonks was repairing it now while Emma was using a tissue to wipe lipstick off a blushing best man.

This interaction was completely missed by the bride and groom, Harry and Hermione hadn't taken their eyes off each other since the hotel lobby and were oblivious to everything else around them.

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Emma was delighted when she finally got to see the wedding venue. That this was the original blacksmith room dating back to the seventeen hundreds went a long way to calming her last remaining nerves and fears. Over the last few centuries there must have been countless couples who started their married life in front of the most famous anvil in the world. That five thousand weddings a year were now held here didn't lessen the romance of the place. When she spied the piper that Harry had hired, making his way out to greet Dan and Hermione when the car returned in a few minutes, the first tear of the day squeezed out the corner of her eye. It wouldn't be the last to be shed on this special day by the mother of the bride.

This was quickly proven to be true when the bagpipes started playing 'Highland Cathedral' as Dan led his daughter toward the man she would spend the rest of her life with.

Harry had requested the piper to stop at the door and not interfere with his wife walking toward him, that he could see her smile at his surprise meant he'd gotten it right. Now it was time.

-oOoOo-

Severus Snape had not been idle but all his preparations had been complete for a couple of days now. He'd been trying to meditate while waiting on the summons that was going to change his life irrevocably. Severus' belief in his own abilities, and himself was total but only a complete fool would underestimate the dark lord. Suddenly his arm burned fiercely, signalling the waiting was finally over. Now it was time.

A/N Thanks for reading

Think there is only one more chapter of this to go but I won't know for certain until I begin writing it. I will now be sticking with this one until the end. No Hurry at All has certainly written itself in a rush.

## Chapter 18

Severus hated blind apparition with a passion but had no other option available at the moment. When the dark lord summoned you, your dark mark led you directly to his presence. He then found himself in a room with no windows, flickering torches mounted on the walls providing the only illumination. It would appear as if this was some cellar that the dark lord had taken to hiding in.

The potions master fought a ferocious mental battle to keep a smirk from appearing on his face. Voldemort was unquestionably the most wanted criminal in magical Britain, with bounty hunters and mercenaries from around the world desperate for a share of the half million in gold that his head would fetch. Add to that, his once considerable force of fanatical death eaters were reduced to just Wormtail and you had a rather pragmatic and pathetic fall from grace. Still, appearances must be maintained. Sitting on a raised platform in the middle of the floor was the dark lord, regally perched on a chair fit for any king.

What an arsehole.

Severus hammered that thought mercilessly, it would surely get him killed. The potions master had been well aware the potions he'd had to swallow before answering Voldemort's summons would affect him in many different ways, he apparently had underestimated just how severe these effects would be.

Voldemort began speaking and again Severus had to be ruthless with his thoughts. 'How can you have a nasal whine with practically no nose?' just popped into his head.

"Ah Severus, my slippery friend. I can see from your forehead that you too had an unfortunate encounter with Mister Potter."

Severus moved forward in order to kneel before his master but found himself unable to do so. His body would no longer function from the neck down.

"Ah yes, I've been forced to introduce one or two safety measures since that Potter spawn placed all that gold on my head." Snape's wand flew from his robes, straight into Voldemort's waiting hand. "Search him Wormtail."



Severus was now sweating but when Peter left him to hand his findings over to his master, some of that tension left his body. The rat had only found his potions knife, any potions brewer worth their salt always carried one of these. With potions ingredients found literally growing on trees and lying on the ground, it was essential to always have the necessary tools available to harvest anything one found.

Voldemort had been staring at him all through the search. "You choose not to cover Potter's mark?"

Though unable to move, Severus still had the ability to speak. "Forgive me master, I meant no disrespect. I have discovered however that it bleeds less if I leave it uncovered. I shall of course cover the abomination if it offends you."

The dark lord was still trying to come to a decision about this particular servant. A very large plus in Snape's favour was that he is an exceptional potions master, a potions master who would be extremely motivated to find a cure for this affliction they both now carried. "Have you made any progress on healing these accursed wounds?"

"Master, I have been researching all summer. Since receiving my own curse scar, I have had neither the time nor resources to do any further investigating into the matter."

Voldemort accepted that answer. "You shall have the run of a potions lab already in this house, I want you to begin at once."

"I must beg your forgiveness once more master. I have not slept for four days and fear only the amount of pepper-up potion in my blood is keeping me going. In my present condition, I'm more likely to accidentally set fire to this house than discover a remedy that both of us require."

The dark lord was not known for showing mercy to his followers but he didn't have a lot of options, or followers left. "You shall have four hours rest Severus, not a moment longer."

The potions master found himself being released from the constraining spell and quickly fell to his knees in front of the dark

lord. Unfortunately, the mixture of toxic chemicals currently pumping around his body left Severus unable to prevent exhibiting a very brief flash of the emotion he now felt. He was once more unable to move as Voldemort had picked up on this display of jubilation immediately, though it was already too late for the occupants of the room.

"Severus, why do I get the feeling you are attempting something foolish? Let's find out what, shall we? Legilimens!"

The dark lord was shocked beyond measure at the maelstrom he discovered inside his servant's mind. Where before there was a well-organised mind, now there were full-scale riots where conflicting thoughts fought for dominance. Overuse of pepper-up potion couldn't explain this effect, nor could he latch on to any thoughts that could possibly help him. It was as if a tornado had hit a library and you were left trying to find a specific book as they swirled passed your head at great speed.

A disturbance in the real world had Voldemort withdrawing from Snape's mind, perhaps this would provide a clue. The sight of his last faithful follower thrashing on the floor greeted the dark lord, Peter was also beginning to foam at the mouth.

He screamed at the wizard who was still held trapped by his spell. "What have you done Snape? Avada Ked... Ke... K..."

Severus still couldn't move but he could still speak. The antidote that was coursing through his body was unfortunately having the side effect of compelling him to behave rather like an eleven year old Draco Malfoy. He just couldn't stop himself from boasting about his achievements in outwitting the dark lord.

"According to the old manuscript I found this particular potion in, it's supposed to be a most painful way to die Tom. You are currently infected by an airborne toxin that violently attacks and destroys your nervous system, before reducing your internal organs to mush. It was invented by Dante to punish Florence for banishing him from the city, unfortunately he tested the antidote on himself first and it drove him quite mad for a number of years."

Voldemort was currently trying to kill Severus with a vicious glare from those malicious red eyes, it was the only reaction the dark lord still had available to him.

"When Dante eventually recovered his mind, Florence had rescinded its exile order and the city was now begging him to return. He decided saying no was now enough of a revenge. Just a pity you never got to work in Hogwarts Tom, old Albus really does have quite the collection of knowledge in the headmaster's private library."

Voldemort still had his wand pointed in Severus' direction but he was now totally incapable of performing any spells. His hand was also trembling terribly as the toxin began to aggressively complete its victorious march through his body. The immobilisation spell he'd cast on Severus finally broke, allowing the potions master to stand. Wet patches were now clearly visible on the knees of his trousers.

"When you made me kneel, it broke the containers I had strapped there and released the toxin into the air. I of course had taken a dose of antidote before I answered your summons."

Voldemort himself was now on his knees though his eyes were locked on Wormtail in horror. Peter had finally stopped thrashing about and lay still. This was no improvement though as blood seeped from his eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth. It looked a horrendous way to die.

"Yes the old parchment described the effects as worse than those of the cruciatus curse. You have cast that on enough people, myself included, to know what awaits you."

The antidote had Severus wanting to stand here and crow all day but his own vastly more rational personality was screaming at him to finish the dark lord off immediately. Voldemort wasn't exactly human anymore and Severus had worried the toxin might not actually kill him. Picking up his discarded potions knife, Severus expertly cut the dark lord's throat. The former death eater watched those hateful red eyes finally dim as Voldemort quickly bled to death.

Severus breathed a huge sigh of relief that his scheme had actually worked, Wormtail would follow his master into death in mere moments. The potions master knew he couldn't go anywhere for at least an hour, that's how long it would take his modified version of

the Dante potion to decay beyond the point where it was no longer toxic. Since there was only one chair in the room, he sat on Voldemort's throne.

He'd known the antidote would demand a high price from him but, now that the deed was done, Severus considered it a price worth paying. The choice between a psycho dark lord, a prison full of dementors or half a million of Potter's gold plus a ministry pardon was not a hard one to make. The silver potions knife dropped out his hand and hit the stone floor with a musical clang as Severus conceded it was over. His new life though was just about to begin.

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The hammer striking the anvil signified it was over. His new life though was just about to begin. Harry started his new life the way he wanted it to continue, by kissing his beautiful bride. This was greeted with much cheering and applause from their few guests while the wedding photographer just clicked away. There were some more formal poses for pictures before they all piled back into the limo. The trip back to Edinburgh was a lot noisier than the one down to Gretna, especially when Dan opened a bottle of champagne and started filling glasses.

Their arrival back at the Balmoral was greeted by more photographs, the bride and groom walking into the lobby stopped everyone in their tracks. Harry and Hermione were quite the sight.

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The person who shot out the floo in the ministry atrium was also quite the sight, everyone was stopped in their tracks as the bloody body slid across the marble floor. No sooner had it come to a halt than it was identified as Peter Pettigrew. This was causing quite a bit of panic when another dead body shot out to join him. This cadaver was instantly recognised as You Know Who and the screaming began. Severus stepped out of the floo to a scene of utter pandemonium.

When he'd discovered the house the dark lord had been using as his hideout had an active floo connection, Severus couldn't resist a chance at the spectacular entrance. He was well aware the potion was still badly affecting him because he was really looking forward

to this, Severus Snape never looked forward to anything. He'd opened the floo connection before banishing the bodies into the green flames one at a time. The result of this was that when he eventually stepped out of the ministry fireplace, not one person was looking in his direction. That there were over fifty people there, and that number was growing rapidly, yet he was being ignored actually made him smile.

He wasn't here to be ignored though, it was time to change that. He carefully held his hands up, with his palms forward to showing that they were empty, before shouting. "SURPRISE! I've come for my gold and my pardon."

Severus Snape now had every pair of eyes fixed on him, this was more like it.

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Harry made sure that it was only the guests who were in their private function room, he didn't want any other eyes seeing this. "I have a surprise for you Mrs Potter. Now Dobby."

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Minerva McGonagall was currently sitting behind the headmaster's desk in Dumbledore's office. The school governors were meeting next week and the odds were very favourable she could find herself sitting here permanently. Albus had been arrested for the second occasion this summer and Amelia appeared determined to keep him locked up this time.

Minerva now found herself questioning every decision Albus had made, looking for any hidden agenda behind it. An elf popping into the office had her turning round, Minerva was on her feet in an instant as she recognised who this elf represented.

"Miss Kitty, my master and mistress would like to invite you to share dinner with them?"

Minerva didn't need time to consider her answer, rather just a moment to floocall Filius and inform him she would be out the castle for dinner. On removing her head from the fireplace, Minerva was shocked to discover Dobby had transfigured her teaching robes into

a dark blue dress, complete with tartan sash. Before she even got a chance to ask what was going on, Dobby had whisked her away from Hogwarts.

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Minerva McGonagall was not what you would consider an emotional lady. Seeing the young witch she had been worried about standing there in her wedding dress had her tired old eyes filling up. A kilted Harry Potter then came forward and hugged her.

"Professor, you will always have a place at the Potter's table. My wife and I would like you to join our celebrations."

"Mr Potter, I would be delighted to. You look wonderful in your kilt while you Miss Granger are the most beautiful bride I've ever seen."

Hermione hugged her favourite professor. "Thank you but I must point out I'm Mrs Potter now. We got married earlier today and my wonderful husband knew I would have wanted you here. Excuse me a moment professor while I kiss him in thanks."

Minerva was soon swept along with the euphoria that was prevalent in the room. When Dan placed a glass of bubbly in her hand though, she felt she didn't deserve it. "Dan, I can't say sorry enough for what happened..."

Dan held up his hand in the universal sign for stop. "We never blamed you Minerva, Emma and I only allowed Hermione back inside Hogwarts because we knew Harry was going to be with her every second she was there."

This had Minerva spinning around to confront the groom. "You were at the awards ceremony?"

Harry's grin was all the confirmation she needed. "I loved your idea of where to display my Order of Merlin, though I think Madam Pomfrey could have made a good argument for having it hung in the infirmary. Thanks for everything professor."

The hotel staff reappeared to see if they were ready for their meal, all then sat at their designated position at the table. The meal was exquisite and the company made it even better.

After the meal was finished, there was a gentle tinkle of cutlery hitting a wine glass to call for silence. It was a sign of how much Neville had grown in confidence that when he stood, no one present was too surprised by his actions.

"I understand it's tradition at this point for the best man to make a speech. Since it was only last evening that we found out these two were getting married, you'll perhaps understand why this will be a very short speech."

This generated the laughter Neville was hoping for.

"It's a little known fact but I was responsible for these two meeting, or perhaps the credit should go to Trevor? I shared a boat with them as we all got our first sight of Hogwarts and have watched them grow closer over the years. I can honestly say that I think they were fated to be together since that first eventful Halloween."

Neville was smiling at the blushing bride as he related the next part. "Within the space of a few months, Hermione went from a girl who thought getting expelled was worse than being killed to setting a teacher's robes on fire. Harry here jumped on a mountain troll's back and stuck his wand up its nose. The reason for these ridiculous reactions was that the other was in danger, they really would do anything for each other."

The best man now turned his attention to the groom. "I've only ever seen Harry terrified once, the night Hermione was injured inside the ministry. I don't think it's a coincidence that all our lives have changed from that night, none more than the couple we are all here to honor today. Please join me in standing and offering this toast, Hermione and Harry - the bride and groom!"

Everyone joined Neville in the toast before Hermione nudged her husband's elbow and Harry stood.

"My wife has just suggested I say a few words. I may have only been married for a few hours but already I know my wife's suggestions should be followed to the letter."

This saw the other two married men present almost choke with laughter.

"Neville was right to mention that night in the ministry, I know my life changed forever at one specific moment. Seeing my Hermione injured like that dramatically brought home just how much she means to me. It's no coincidence that she's now my wife only months after that event."

He lent down and gave his wife a peck on the lips before continuing. "I must disagree with my best man though, the two lives most affected since that night are Dan and Emma. Everything they knew has been blown apart, figuratively and literally, yet they supported Hermione and I when we needed it most. I have one surprise left and think now's as good a time as any."

Harry reached into his sporran and pulled out a large envelope that obviously couldn't fit in there. "Hermione and I are leaving tomorrow on a two week Mediterranean cruise. Mum, dad, we'd like you to come with us?"

Harry handed over the envelope to Dan, It had their tickets and passports in it. Hermione was now kissing her husband in thanks, closely followed by her mother doing the same. A cruise on the Med might be nice but to Emma Granger, Harry calling her mum was way better.

With such a small wedding party, the table was soon clear and it was time for the first dance. Hermione melted into Harry's arms as the string quartet struck up a waltz.

Harry effortlessly and expertly whisked her around the floor, much to his wife's amazement. "I thought you said you were finished with the surprises for the night? Where did you learn to dance?"

"Hermione love, I hope to spend the rest of my life surprising you. You remember I told you I got to play Quidditch with my dad and Sirius? Well my mum wanted some time with her son to teach me all the things she never got the chance to. I learned to dance in my mother's arms in the hope that one day I would be having this dance with my very own Mrs Potter."

Hermione was listening to her husband and her heart was overflowing, she promised herself to make certain Harry knew she loved him every day for the rest of their lives.



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Amelia was listening in mounting horror as Snape spilled his guts. The interview was not being conducted under the truth serum. The potions master had warned that administering that potion to him would probably end his life, a senior healer from St Mungo's had quickly confirmed that opinion. Snape also pointed out that, since he was due to receive a blanket pardon, he had no intention of leaving anything out.

Amelia now wholeheartedly believed that. He was implicating death eaters, politicians and Wizengamot members as he was supplying the information, rather than them having to ask the right questions to get a truthful answer under veritaserum. This information was going to allow her department to clean out the ministry and more. It galled her though that this creature was going to walk out of the ministry a free man, he certainly couldn't and wouldn't be classed as a hero.

She would be forever grateful that he killed the dark lord and for the information he eagerly disgorged but she would never like the man. He was by his own admission a cold-hearted bastard and she would add cruel, vindictive and downright evil to that assessment. There would be a careful watch kept on him for the rest of his life. The ministry pardon was for crimes committed up to and including the killing of the dark lord. If Severus Snape as much as left the toilet seat up, Amelia would find something to charge him with.

The list of people implicated in Snape's testimony had grown almost as long as the list of charges against them. A few of the names pleased Amelia no end, there would be quite a bit of work in rounding them up. By good fortune, one of the main ones was already in a ministry holding cell.

One thing she could not dispute though, Snape's testimony here today would change their world.

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Minerva was sitting chatting with Ginny while the dancing continued. "I fear we will be experiencing another howler from your mother when she discovers that she missed out on Harry and Hermione's wedding. I feel your brother has made some poor choices lately."

"Oh I think that's putting it mildly professor. We all got a taste of Harry's fame this summer and all of us, apart from Ron, hated it. He was well aware what the consequences could be when placing Lavender before his friends, today he paid the price. Nothing my mother will scream at him could make him feel worse than missing his two best friends' wedding. He'll be devastated but has no one to blame but himself."

Minerva was more impressed with the youngest Weasley every time she spoke to the girl. She appeared to be a mixture of Bill and the twins, with very little of Percy or Ron. Minerva thought that was a pretty good combination. "And how do you feel about your friends getting married?"

Ginny thought carefully before answering as truthfully as she could. "Since I was a little girl, I dreamed of being dressed like a princess and dancing with Harry Potter on his wedding day. Today I got my wish. Hermione is the nearest thing I've got to a big sister and I couldn't be happier for them."

Minerva's respect for the little redhead just went up another notch as Luna joined them before Neville asked Ginny to dance. Harry was currently dancing with his mother in law while Dan had his daughter in his arms. The Lupins looked as if they were the newlyweds as the danced close.

"Professor, Harry has just promised to send us photographs of today. Don't you think that would make a wonderful front page on the first issue of Hogwarts Teen Weekly?"

"Miss Lovegood, I think that's a brilliant idea. Do you think we could keep their wedding a secret until then?"

"Well everyone who knows about it is in this room right now. The Potters and Grangers are leaving the country tomorrow so they won't be telling anyone. Ginny certainly won't want to be the one to tell Ron what he missed. Professor Lupin will think it's a great prank and Neville knows how to keep his mouth shut."

"Miss Lovegood, I think you just talked yourself into the job of editor."

"Thank you professor, Harry's also going to send them to my father so we want to publish our magazine on the same day, that gives us until Thursday."

Minerva thought that was an excellent suggestion. The Hogwarts group could work on the magazine but only the group here tonight would know what the front page was going to be. Anyone else who needed to know would be sworn to secrecy. This would launch the magazine with an almighty bang.

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Albus was wondering why he'd been brought to the interview room when the door burst open with an almighty bang. Severus strutted into the room and sat across from his former boss.

"I did it old man, the dark lord is no more."

It took a moment for that momentous news to sink in. "Well done Severus, how did you manage it?"

"I used Dante's potion."

It was a good job Albus was sitting because his legs would never have supported him after hearing that. "The antidote, you took it? Obviously you took it or you wouldn't be sitting here talking to me. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I could get myself out from the situation I'd been manipulated into. I want my life back and Potter's gold will certainly help with that."

"What about Harry?"

"What about him? He's leaving our world and I don't see them lining up to proclaim me as their new savior, Bones looked desperate to get away and take a shower. If Potter leaves me alone, I can live with that."

"Well Severus, I'm delighted to see you're finally seeing some sense. Perhaps the antidote wasn't as bad as Dante's manuscript indicated?"

"I spent over a decade working on it to ensure I would survive. You had your ace in the hole old man, that was mine. When Potter stopped playing your game, it totally destroyed all your plans. I never counted on anyone but myself."

Albus had the grace to look embarrassed. "At least our plan worked, now I can get out of here..."

"Our plan? When did it become 'our plan?' I'm sorry Severus, I can't help you in any way. I distinctly remember those words old man, you threw me at Voldemort and didn't care whether I lived or died. Just another one of your little schemes, just another pawn to be sacrificed in your game."

"Severus, I always had confidence in you..."

"Save it Albus. Your little scheme had one massive flaw running right through it. When the ministry offered me that pardon, I told them everything."

This was an even bigger shock to Dumbledore than discovering Voldemort was dead. His voice was barely above a whisper. "Everything?"

"Yes old man, every single thing you've done in the fifteen years that I've worked for you. I just came here to say goodbye because you're totally fucked!"

"Why?"

"I told you why, I want my life back. Voldemort's gone but I needed rid of you too, otherwise I would never be free. We won't meet again Albus, it's been fun."

Severus walked out of the room as four aurors practically had to carry Dumbledore back to his cell.

-oOoOo-

Harry picked his bride up and carried her across the threshold of their room. This was not the room Hermione had left earlier that morning though, Dobby and Winky had made one or two modifications.

There was now a giant four-poster bed that was draped in white silk, there were at least five hundred candles floating in the air. Soft music was playing while every surface appeared to be covered in scented rose petals.

Hermione had both her arms around her husband's neck as he cradled her in his arms. "Harry, this is beautiful. You're spoiling me."

"Mrs Potter, you deserve the best. Unfortunately, you had to settle for me so I promise to spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you."

"Mr Potter, I got the only thing I ever wanted. It even came gift-wrapped in tartan. Now help me get out of this dress before I rip it off, I want to open my present."

Who could argue against reasoning like that. Harry hurriedly complied with his wife's suggestion.

-oOoOo-

Severus was proudly marching through the ministry atrium toward the public floos when a woman made a beeline straight toward him. The witch appeared as if she'd been waiting for some time.

"Severus, the news has been going crazy all day saying you killed you know who, is it true?"

He was not in the mood to talk to anyone, spending time with Albus would often do that to him. "Yes it's true."

"Severus, if you're going away, could you please take me with you?"

Severus carefully scrutinised the young witch, she really was quite pretty. "Why?"

She removed her hat to reveal the matching scar. "There really is nothing for me here either."

"Matilda, you know I'm an utter bastard?"

"Severus, you are my only hope. No one else will have anything to do with me. You are the only other person who can understand what this mark means, please?"

He thought for a moment before nodding. Matilda jammed her hat back on and followed him as he walked away, she missed the smile on his face.

Severus threw some floo powder into the fireplace and called out Gringotts before disappearing, Matilda followed.

-oOoOo-

Cornelius could see the writing was on the wall, his only objective now was to try and stop it appearing all over the pages of the Daily Prophet. He was a politician though and was sure he could still squeeze a drop of good publicity out of this for himself.

He was positive Amelia wouldn't want to see the good name of the ministry dragged through the mud, by offering to resign at Halloween Cornelius felt certain she would settle for that outcome.

The muggle Prime Minister would be contacted and Cornelius would take great delight in passing along the good news. The last remaining terrorist who participated in the Crawley attack was now dead, as was the leader who ordered it carried out.

In his retrial speech, he would be able to claim forging closer relations with the muggle government as one of his major achievements. That he also presided over the final demise of the dark lord should pace the final stamp of approval on his years of leadership.

Yes, there might even be a book or two out of this if he played his cards right. Cornelius Fudge might soon be gone from the ministry but it would be a long time before he was forgotten.

Retiring to pursue other things certainly sounds so much better than being sacked and facing charges of incompetence and corruption.

These revelations made by Snape would see Amelia's department buried under mountains of work, he was sure she would let him

sneak out the back door so there could quickly be a new minister appointed.

-oOoOo-

The news that Voldemort was finally dead, combined with some startling implications against prominent members of their society, meant all eyes were glued to the Daily Prophet that Sunday. The wedding party's return was hardly noticed and certainly not commented upon. These topics continued to dominate peoples' attention for the rest of the week, even owls delivering packages to Neville, Ginny and Luna a few days later didn't rate a comment when compared to some of the charges Dumbledore was reportedly facing. His apparent excuse that it was all for the greater good was going down about as well as mash potato peppered with broken glass. Indigestible.

Ron felt all these revelations were at least diverting attention away from the transgressions of him and Lavender. There was also a sense of excitement as today saw the first publication of Hogwarts new magazine. Lavender sat down beside him and Ron was sure she appeared so distraught because his girlfriend hadn't gotten the chance to work on the new Teen Weekly.

"Ron, I'm late. I'm never late and I have a really bad feeling about this."

McGonagall was standing to talk as Ron attempted to offer comfort to his girlfriend. "It's ok honey, you were only a couple of minutes late and you haven't missed anything yet. In fact, you were later down to breakfast yesterday."

"Good morning everyone. We've all read the startling revelations that have happened in our world since Saturday, we included a few articles on how we think this might affect the Hogwarts community in our first issue of Teen Weekly."

"No Ron, you don't understand. I think I'm expecting."

"We're all expecting to get our hands on the new magazine the moment McGonagall shuts up, you'll just have to be patient."

"Unknown to all but a few, there was another big event taking place on Saturday. This one was a bit more pleasurable than the widely reported demise of a dark lord. I, along with a few staff and students, felt truly privileged to be included."

"Ronald Weasley, I think I'm pregnant with your baby!"

"We decided to lead with that story and you'll understand all the secrecy in a moment. I give to you the first ever issue of Hogwarts Teen Weekly."

The magazines appeared on the house tables by the same method as their meals and all the squeals of delight masked the sound of Ron Weasley's head smacking off the Gryffindor table as he fainted. Lavender was shaking Ron and slapping his face before Dean's comment cut her off.

"I can't say I don't understand his reaction."

Seamus was nodding in agreement. "Your two best friends in the world get married and you don't even get told about it, far less bag an invite. Bound to have some affect. Does Ginny look hot in that dress or what?"

Lavender's attention switched to the colour magazine that had appeared next to her. There, on the front page, was Harry kissing Hermione as their wedding guests cheered in the background. The fact that it was obviously a muggle picture detracted not one iota from its impact.

Flipping over the page revealed lots more pictures and a glance up showed Neville, Luna and Ginny being bombarded with questions as they sat at the Ravenclaw table. Even from here though, Lavender could clearly see they weren't handing out many answers. If only she'd chosen the same route, she and Ron would have been included in those fabulous pictures and not sitting here with their lives about to crash and burn.

Lavender though was still enough of a fashion hound to mentally correct Seamus. Ginny wasn't hot, she and Luna were smoking while Hermione simply set the page on fire. There had been gallons of drool deposited by witches up and down the country over the



picture of the trio fighting dementors, Harry and Neville in kilts might start a whole new trend for printing onto waterproof paper.

Ron was eventually starting to stir, only to feel light-headed once more the instant his eyes focused on the magazine in front of him. The implications of this left him shattered. Ron was now holding Lavender's hand and trying to console himself that at least things couldn't get any worse when a voice boomed out over the entire great hall.

"Ronald Billius Weasley!"

His mother was marching toward him with a copy of the Quibbler in her hand, rage etched over every square inch of her face. Molly Weasley had apparently decided to deliver this Howler personally.

Thanks for reading

A/N Ok I agree, I couldn't really leave it there. In deference to the last movie, which I still haven't seen yet, I'm going to do something I have repeatedly said I never would. There will be a short epilogue published for No Hurry at All, hopefully in the next few days. I even went and reread the one Jo Rowling wrote, now that's dedication! :)

## Epilogue

The Potters walking through the magical portal onto platform nine and three quarters was the family's first contact with the general wizarding public for eighteen years. Yes they always kept in touch with the Longbottoms, Weasleys and Lupins, that though was the limit of their involvement with wizarding Britain. Harry and Hermione had occasionally met with Minister Bones, but never inside the ministry of magic and always in conjunction with their roles in the government. In fact the Potter family now spent at least eight months of the year overseas.

The reason for today's expedition was simple, Daniel Potter was eleven and had received his Hogwarts letter. Daniel was the eldest of their three children, being conceived the night his parents discovered they'd passed their degrees. His sister Jane and brother Mathew had followed at roughly two year intervals. The entire family was here to see Daniel off on the express. That of course included his two best friends, Billy and Toni.

That these friends were the twins of Dobby and Winky never raised an eyebrow in the Potter household, all three youngsters had been raised together as the extended family travelled the globe. Like today though, the twins wore glamours Hermione had designed whenever they interacted with the outside world.

The family were treated to a lot more than raised eyebrows as the Potters, flanked by the Grangers made their way along platform nine and three quarters. The legend of the boy who lived had only grown since Harry left and, with none of their friends ever breathing a word of what they were actually up to, speculation over the Potters' lives had almost become an industry in itself.

Harry and Hermione could see their children beginning to physically wilt as the staring, pointing and whispering gradually intensified. Nine year old Jane had inherited her fathers green eyes and her mother's brown bushy hair, she was also the most sensitive of the three Potter children. Whatever part of the world they happened to be in, Jane would always find small animals that had been hurt and bring them home to be helped. She was a complete natural with all kinds of creatures and seemed to have a special empathy for reading emotions. The young girl didn't like what she was sensing

here. Though normally anything but shy, Jane was almost hiding behind her mother.

"Mum, I don't want to go to Hogwarts."

"Honey, you have another two years before you have to make that decision."

"I don't care mum, I won't change my mind. I don't like being stared at."

Matt had a tight grip of his father's hand, he obviously shared his sister's sentiments. "Dad, why are all the people staring at us?"

Harry wasn't sure how you explain that to a seven year old. "They've always stared at me son. That's why your Uncle Neville and Aunt Luna took care of Daniel's shopping for him, we would be mobbed walking down Diagon Alley."

"But dad, don't they know staring, pointing and whispering is rude?"

Harry couldn't fault his son's logic. "They know son, they just don't care."

Daniel may have looked the spitting image of his father at the same age but there all similarities ended.

This was no child who had been denied affection and friends, Daniel had been raised in the heart of a loving family who really enjoyed travelling around the world. While his mum and dad would work at constructing and then establishing the hospital, his gran would be concentrating on the school that would always be built next to the hospital. All three Potter children had been taught by their parents and grandparents, standing in this railway station and preparing to leave for school felt totally alien to them.

The aforementioned Daniel Potter was beginning to think he'd made a very big mistake. He was used to crowds and everyone knowing who his parents were but this was somehow different. Here he wasn't the son of two doctors who were building the local hospital, these people were ogling his parents as if they were superstar celebrities. Daniel was actually more like his father at this point than

he realised. He was bewildered and scared, just like an eleven year old Harry Potter had been while standing here all those years ago.

Harry spotted Daniel's distress so handed Matt over into his grandfather's care before kneeling down on one knee to talk to his eldest son. "What's the problem Daniel?"

Daniel looked toward his two best friends, then to his family. "Dad, how did you stand all the attention? Never knowing if someone was really your friend? How could you be away from everyone you loved for all that time?"

Harry looked up at his smiling wife before answering. "It was easy for me son, everyone I loved was at Hogwarts. That was worth all the staring and pointing in the world to me."

"I don't know if I can do this dad? I've listened to all the wonderful stories about Quidditch and Gryffindor but it's suddenly just hit me, I won't see you guys until Christmas. I don't know if I want to go dad?"

"Is that all that's troubling you?"

"I've felt like a bug under a microscope ever since we walked through the barrier. I'm not even on the train yet and everyone's staring and pointing, what will it be like in Hogwarts?"

"Well you know your Uncle Remus and Aunt Tonks will be in the castle, Teddy's also head boy this year. The four Weasley girls will also be there, you know them."

Harry saw his son wince and realised his last comment was not a positive incentive. It apparently wasn't just Quidditch scoring records Ginny was breaking, her birth had well and truly shattered the 'no female Weasleys' curse. Ron and Lavender were now the proud parents of four daughters. Their grandparents adored the girls with the Burrow becoming a party venue every time they visited. All the girls were now attending Hogwarts and each was almost a clone of their mother at the same age. Ron had left Hogwarts early, with no NEWT's and a baby on the way. Harry had pulled him out a deep hole by sending Ron ten percent of WWW as he had always intended. The twins though decided Ron should work to make his ten percent worth more and gave him a job.

With his four girls being born in rapid succession, Ron was now a work-o-holic and managed the Hogsmead branch of the company. Privately, Harry felt that he too would do anything to get out of a house that had five Lavenders in it.

When the Potters had last seen the girls, the two youngest had gotten into a fight over who was going to be Daniel's girlfriend. The oldest already had her eyes set on Harry's godson. Neither Teddy nor Daniel were even consulted in these matters and both boys went out of their way to avoid the girls.

Daniel then got to the very heart of the matter. "Dad, would you be really angry with me if I said I didn't want to go? I think I'd rather continue attending school the way we have been."

The hopeful expressions mirrored on three faces earned a smile from Harry. "When have I ever been really angry at you?"

"Well, there was that one time in Uganda where Billy, Toni and I vanished the clothes of our entire class."

Harry leaned over to whisper in his son's ear. "Dobby and I thought that was bloody hilarious. It was your mum, gran and Winky who were mad."

This seemed to make Daniel's mind up. "Dad, mum, I don't want to go to Hogwarts. I want to go back to Brazil with you guys and learn the way I have been."

Hermione had also been keeping an eye on the crowd steadily building around them and was beginning to feel like her family were some exotic exhibit in a zoo. Who needs Pandas when you can stare at the Potters?

"I agree with Daniel. I think we made a serious mistake in thinking he could go to Hogwarts and just be a normal student. We can send an owl to Remus once we get out of here."

Emma had a large grin on her face as she nudged her husband. "Told you."

This had both Potter parents looking toward her, their expressions clearly indicating they expected an explanation.

The grandmother gave a wistful grin as she answered. "We've seen you do wonderful things all over the world. Being parted from one of your children for four months was always going to be a step too far for you. Look me in the eye and tell me your not delighted with the decision Daniel's just reached?"

Harry began laughing and ruffled his eldest son's hair. Billy and Toni were jumping for joy that their best friend wouldn't be on the other side of the world until Christmas. It was left to little Matt to have the last word.

"If Daniel and Jane aren't going, then me neither." This was said with all the conviction a seven year old could muster.

Mathew then found himself hoisted onto his grandfather's shoulders as the family fought against the flow of people entering and headed for the exit. That the Potters were obviously leaving was proving an extremely unpopular decision with the gathered crowd and Harry found himself having to glower at a few people to get them to move out their path.

They had almost reached the barrier when a face Harry hoped he would never see again passed trough it, accompanied by two teenage girls and a woman he also recognised.

"Potter."

"Snape, long time no see. I can't say I've missed you."

Severus was pushing his daughters behind him, their mother reacting quickly and gathering both girls into her arms. He then caught sight of Hermione and knew there was something he had to do.

"Mrs Potter, I owe you an unreserved apology for my behaviour toward you. I was in a very bad place at the time but I have really no excuses." Severus glanced towards his girls who were struggling to get back to their father, clearly sensing something was wrong here. "Over everything I've ever done, that one incident gives me the most frequent and horrific nightmares. I keep seeing my daughters faces..." He actually couldn't finish what he was trying to say but everyone got the gist of it.

Harry's temper may have mellowed over the years but he knew there was no way he could be rational with Snape. This would be Hermione's call. Harry had taught his wife everything he knew and she could easily deal with the pardoned death eater.

Hermione instantly noticed that neither Snape nor his wife still carried Harry's mark, she understood this indicated that they really had changed. She also noticed the two girls desperate to get back to their father's side.

She nodded her head in acceptance. "Those were different times and there have been many changes since. I see no need to open old wounds."

Dan however disagreed. He had handed Matt over to his grandmother and then launched himself at the bastard who had arranged the attack on his daughter. By the time Harry managed to pull Dan off, Snape was on the ground and his face was a bloody mess.

Matilda held on tight to both her daughters, they were screaming at this man who was attacking their father. She knew her husband deserved this and more. Severus may have been handed a pardon but over the years he'd never pardoned himself, there wasn't a week went by but that nightmare woke him. Perhaps this would give the man she loved the closure he so badly needed.

Harry had both his arms wrapped around his father in law but Dan was still glaring down at the prostrate figure of Snape, the man was bleeding from his nose and mouth. "The only reason I don't kill you right this minute is that Hermione was never really in any danger that night. Harry was with her the entire time. Even at sixteen, he was more of a man than you'll ever be."

Hermione took her father's now damaged hands in hers, the glow as she healed Dan's hands was noticeable to the hundreds of people who were now watching the free entertainment. "Let's all go home dad, there's nothing here for us anymore."

The large crowd was forced to part as Daniel Potter pushed his trolley toward the portal back to Kings Cross, leading his family away from their very brief foray back into the magical world. Harry

was the last to leave and turned around to see Snape now being attended to by his wife and two crying daughters.

"Severus, I thought it was poetic justice that Dumbledore spent his last years locked up and thanks for Peter. You saved me a job there."

With the entire platform watching, Harry calmly passed through the portal. Thus ending the Potters link with magical Britain.

The End

Thanks for reading